ABSTRACT


This thesis explores the institutional history of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project (NCOSH). Initially founded based on the COSH model, which sought to create an alliance of medical professionals, attorneys, and organized labor that would provide a voice for the health concerns of workers, NCOSH stretched that framework over time to incorporate some of the most vulnerable laborers, including the unorganized, youth, and immigrants. These accomplishments were not without difficulty, navigating racial and gender considerations, as well as the established political and economic system that championed industry and development over workers and their communities. Drawing on author conducted oral history interviews and archival records, this thesis traces NCOSH’s increasingly growing role among labor in North Carolina, highlighting the challenges and possible solutions for health and safety movements in low union environments.
For a Safe and Healthy Workplace: The North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project, 1976-2001

by
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History

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the laborers of North Carolina and all of those who were involved in the success of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project.
BIOGRAPHY

Derrick Kay was born in Sanford, North Carolina and grew up in the Asbury community of Chatham County. Prior to becoming a graduate student at North Carolina State University, he earned his Master of Arts in Teaching from Duke University and his Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, writing a Senior Honors Thesis entitled “Coal Mining in North Carolina: A Forgotten Example of Southern Industrialization.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1976, the Brown Lung Association (BLA) hired David Austin to be the full-time Research Director, focusing his attention on the policies and practices of the federal and state Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), examining cotton dust inspections and case depositions. The BLA had been founded to advocate on behalf of disabled textile workers, who suffered from byssinosis (brown lung), and to lobby for stricter standards that would limit cotton dust exposure on the textile shop floor. Although Austin had just graduated with a Masters of Public Health from the University of North Carolina, he “knew next-to-nothing about how the workers’ comp system worked, or didn’t work …. and only a little bit more about workplace safety & health standards, how they were created, implemented and enforced.”1 Over the course of his four years with the BLA, Austin became increasingly aware of the plight of textile workers and how the North Carolina workers’ compensation system was set up to delay or deny claims of occupational disease or injury.

While working for the BLA, Austin also volunteered his time with the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project (NCOSH), a group that was formed in the spring of 1976 to empower “groups of workers to realize the need for, and to achieve control over basic conditions of their work situation.”2 In 1979 he became NCOSH’s Program and Administrative Director, seeking to broaden the awareness of workplace safety and health issues beyond the

2 “The North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project (NCOSH),” Folder 53 in the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project Records #4578, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [Archive hereafter cited as SHC; collection hereafter cited as NCOSH]
textile mill, a focus that had been inherited from NCOSH’s close relationship to the BLA. Although Austin’s and NCOSH’s goals were largely aspirational in the beginning, by the time Austin left in 1985, the group had developed into a strong advocate for labor throughout North Carolina, a trend that would continue until the group’s demise in the mid-2000s. This thesis explores the contours of NCOSH and its development, tracing its trajectory from a small, volunteer oriented group to an organization that represented tens of thousands of laborers in North Carolina.

In 1965, the Public Health Service, under the direction of the United States Surgeon General issued a report, “Protecting the Health of Eighty Million Americans: A National Goal for Occupational Health,” which sought to outline a national agenda for the elimination of occupational safety and health hazards within the American workplace. Among the findings of the report was an estimate that “every 20 minutes a new, and potentially toxic, chemical is introduced into industry.” Workers faced an uphill battle in confronting chronic disease, facing problems of low-level exposure to different chemicals, and a lack of preventive health services. The writers of this report saw the solutions to these problems within the purview of the federal government; the government acting as a leader among industry and labor alike. As the federal bureaucracy began to take a more active role in the study of workplace health, President Lyndon Johnson joined the debate, urging Congress, in 1968, to enact a safety and health program that

would protect the worker and get rid of “a patchwork of obsolete and ineffective laws.”

As Johnson became weighed down in other areas, particularly Vietnam, his vision stalled and no federal program was created during his tenure in office to combat workplace health issues.

The idea of a national program would again find a voice within the Nixon administration, with Nixon advocating for a national program that would go beyond the traditional safety oriented approach and embody a new focus on worker health. Nixon saw workplace reform as an opportunity to grow his political base, re-orienting workers away from New Deal politics and toward a new, Republican backed coalition. Although it had traditionally been the responsibilities of states to ensure safety in the workplace, Nixon found the overall record of state enforcement to be “haphazard and spotty,” with the “scope and effectiveness of State laws and State administration,” varying greatly and often putting stricter states at a competitive disadvantage. There had been some promising developments, such as collectively bargained contracts with health and safety provisions, but these remained elusive within the broader American labor system. Ultimately, Nixon envisioned a comprehensive administration geared toward research and education that would establish workplace health and safety standards through a “voluntary consensus of industry, labor, and other experts,” in which all views on the

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subject were heard and deliberated. These measures would encourage stronger state enforcement mechanisms and a shared responsibility between all involved, ensuring a safe workplace.⁶

After lengthy Congressional debate and hand wringing over the role of the national program and its powers, the Occupational Safety and Health Act passed in 1970, creating a federal entity that could not only research hazards but also directly set and enforce standards throughout the United States.⁷ The law stated OSHA would “provide for the general welfare,” and “assure so far as possible every working man and woman in the Nation safe and healthful working conditions and to preserve our human resources.” The core components, outlined in section two of the legislation, emphasized the joint responsibility of employers and employees to reduce hazards and guarantee opportunities for training and education. The Act also established the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which would work with industry and workers to identify and research occupational hazards.

This newfound federal power, the ability to regulate the health and safety of the workplace, was somewhat blunted by Section 18, a provision that allows any state to continue or create a state run, and federally approved, OSHA program.⁸ In 1973, North Carolina passed its own OSHA Act, creating a state plan and fully implementing it in 1976, after three years of federal oversight and approval.⁹ The continuation of state plans represented part of Nixon’s

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conceptualization of OSHA and his overarching ideas on New Federalism, making occupational safety and health enforcement a joint program that relied on cooperation and involvement from individuals on the state and federal level.

For labor, these newfound freedoms could be enjoyed only if individuals understood their rights and utilized OSHA as a tool for the empowerment of occupational safety and health efforts in the workplace. Realizing the gap between the educational services provided by unions, and OSHA, committees or coalitions of occupational safety and health (COSH) formed throughout the 1970s to “train rank-and-file workers in health safety,” while also providing “local and technical and political support on a daily or weekly basis … accurately monitor[ing] OSHA enforcement …” and “building mass media interest and public support for stricter enforcement of OSHA law.” These groups sought to build coalitions of workers, unions, and health and legal professionals, allowing for each group to share their experiences and expertise, thereby building up the knowledge and support needed to protect laborers.

The first COSH groups developed in major urban and largely industrial areas, in states with high levels of unionization. The Chicago Area Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (CACOSH), founded in 1972, grew within a state that featured a unionization rate of 32.8 percent. The Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH) was founded in 1975, with a 36.4 percent statewide unionization rate in Pennsylvania. The Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH), officially organized in 1976, featured a statewide rate of 24.5 percent. By 1981, COSH groups existed in California

(22.8%), West Virginia (38.3%), Minnesota (20.2%), New Jersey (25.0%), Rhode Island (24.7%), Maryland (26.1%), Wisconsin (24.5%), and Tennessee (17.6%). Some states, such as New York, Massachusetts, and California, were home to multiple COSH groups.\footnote{Ibid., 104-105; Established groups are compiled from David Lerman, “Occupational Safety and Health Resource Guide,” \textit{Labor Studies Journal} Spring 1981, 155-156.; Unionization rates are compiled from Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and Wayne G. Vroman, “Estimates of Union Density by State,” \textit{Monthly Labor Review}, Vol. 124, No. 7, July 2001. http://unionstats.gsu.edu/MonthlyLaborReviewArticle.htm}

The COSH movement and the individual COSH groups have been a relatively unexamined subject in the decades following their founding. Jessica Wilkerson’s article “Out Front and Strong: Local Women of the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health,”\footnote{Jessica Wilkerson, “Out Front and Strong: Local Women of the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health,” \textit{WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society}, Vol. 11, December 2008, 477-498.} derived from her MA Thesis with the same title, examines the role of local women in TNCOSH. Wilkerson argues that the largely democratic and grassroots oriented focus of the group allowed women to participate on various levels, including within leadership roles, opportunities that had often been denied to women within the confines of organized labor groups. The article does not place the Tennessee group among discussions of the national movement but instead focuses on local campaigns and the unique stories of five women within the organization.\footnote{Worker Centers: \textit{Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream}, by Janice Fine, studies the proliferation of worker centers, community-based institutions that provide support to low-wage and often immigrant workers, between the late 1970s and early 2000s. Her work engages with and overlaps with COSH institutions, particularly among the committees that have altered their organizational models to advocate for the needs of an increasingly immigrant labor}
population. This study surveyed some COSH groups, including NCOSH, to better understand why and how these groups organized themselves toward low wage working populations. Other articles from the early 1980s, referenced in the accompanying footnote, introduce the concept of the groups; however, they do not analyze the developments within a historical or comparative framework.

This thesis, “For a Safe and Healthy Workplace,” builds upon the scant scholarship of the COSH movement, examining the case study of North Carolina as an organization within the national movement while also highlighting the differences and difficulties present within the North Carolina context. In many ways, NCOSH and North Carolina represent a contradiction and inversion of the COSH model. NCOSH did facilitate conversations and working relationships between organized labor, medical and legal professionals, and the coalition itself; however, it existed in a setting more hostile to unions than most other COSH groups. In 1976, North Carolina featured a 7.7 percent unionization rate, a number that had slightly increased to 8.0 percent by 1981 but continually dropped until reaching 3.7 percent in 2001. The 1981 rate put NCOSH at half the rate of Tennessee and Minnesota, and between a third and fifth of the other COSH groups. Although these rates do not provide the entire story, the creation of NCOSH occurred within a backdrop of the larger political economy of North Carolina, an economy that


embraced development programs privileging business and capital at the expense of labor and safety.

Why did NCOSH engage with organized labor within a state and region that boasted the lowest rates of unionization and the most business friendly practices? There is not a simple answer to this question; however, this study goes a long way toward understanding the strengths and pitfalls of such a relationship. The founding group embraced the COSH model, as they saw it in other areas, with aspirations of uniting organized labor and other professionals. The founders saw OSHA as a tool, one that could be used to clean up workplaces, and one that required the education of workers. The already established unions offered a conduit for educational programming, unions being one of the only mechanisms to reach a large number of workers. The relationship was tenuous at first, NCOSH had to be careful of how it spoke about the unions and their role in occupational safety and health. Recognizing that the unions had often done little in the past toward mitigation, NCOSH organizers saw themselves as advocates and allies who could highlight the growing need for health measures in the workplace. The group could offer expertise the unions did not always have, and the unions would eventually provide funding and insights into the workplace issues.

After NCOSH developed a labor and technical board, in the early 1980s, the relationship between itself and the unions guided much of what the organization did. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, NCOSH provided technical assistance, held screening clinics and educational workshops, and advocated on behalf of their union members. While doing this work, NCOSH also organized larger campaigns, such as a critique of the microelectronic industry and support for right-to-know ordinances, which would benefit all workers, not just those in unions. Broad campaigns sometimes offered NCOSH chances to engage with unorganized workers; however,
there were other groups in North Carolina, like Black Workers for Justice, which directly looked to work with unorganized labor. NCOSH increasingly allied and worked with these other groups, especially in the 1990s, but organized labor remained the bedrock of NCOSH’s efforts to draw awareness to the plight of workers.

The thesis research began with four broad, overlapping questions: how did labor oriented community groups look to rebalance the equation of power between workers and companies in North Carolina during the latter half of the twentieth century, what occupational safety issues plagued North Carolina workers during this period, how did NCOSH attempt to approach these issues, and how does tragedy engage a reform movement and what are the obstacles to long term workplace reform?15

The organizational history of NCOSH is chronicled within the following three thesis chapters. The chapters are roughly organized around decades and milestones within the development of the group. Chapter One, The Origins of NCOSH, traces the genesis of NCOSH through an examination of the progressive organizations and personalities that contributed to this organization’s founding. NCOSH represented an amalgamation of strategies, ideologies, and

15 “For a Safe and Healthy Workplace” is largely composed of archival records from the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project Records held at the Southern Historical Collection in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and oral history interviews, fifteen in total, compiled between July 2017 and January 2018. The interviews were gathered using the snowball method, meaning that I approached one individual, Tom O’Connor, who then provided the contact information for more individuals, who then in turn provided the information for even more individuals. The interviews do not represent the totality of relationships or experiences that emanated from NCOSH during the twenty-five years that this study focuses on. The interviewees largely represent volunteers and staff members, only one individual coming from an outside group, Leah Wise, who worked with Southerner’s for Economic Justice and provided context around the Hamlet Response Coalition (HRC), a coalition that NCOSH helped to found, organize with, and support during the first half of the 1990s. These interviews provided faces and character to the myriad of preserved documentation, over 1,900 folders among forty-nine boxes, that provided the foundational evidence for understanding NCOSH and its development over time.
ideas that emanated from the North Carolina Public Service Research Group (PIRG), the BLA, and the People’s Alliance (PA) under the auspices of the COSH model. Although it would largely remain tied to the BLA until the early 1980s, NCOSH did seek to engage OSHA on the federal and state level, beginning its slow march toward building its own organizational identity.

Chapter Two, Funding and Growing NCOSH in the 1980s, examines the growth and development of NCOSH through its search for funding sources and its turn toward collaborating with organized labor. NCOSH did not initially understand the labor climate of North Carolina and had limited contacts within the state; however, the hiring of more staff, with laboring backgrounds, allowed the organization to connect with workers while also studying the occupational hazards present in the state.

Chapter Three, Disaster Reform: The Hamlet Response Coalition and the Political Agenda of Change, begins with the Imperial Food Products fire in September 1991, a fire that exposed the limitations of a workplace safety movement built largely on connections with organized labor. The chapter focuses on the debates around occupational safety and health reform, illustrating the moment of opportunity for occupational reform and the continual presence of repressive politics that sought to maintain the status quo of low unionization, low wages, and little regulation. As the Hamlet moment of opportunity faded, NCOSH increasingly found itself operating within an environment of unorganized labor, particularly that of youth and immigrant workers. NCOSH thus stretched the COSH model to address these changes in the workforce, pushing the organization toward overt connections with unorganized and organized labor alike.

The story of NCOSH is ultimately one of change and adaptation. The group began as a few volunteers in the Raleigh-Durham area, advocating largely on behalf of disabled textile
workers, and grew into a working center that featured ten staff members, fifteen medical and labor board members, and a core of volunteers and supporters situated throughout the state. Founding itself initially within the COSH model, NCOSH stretched that framework over time to incorporate some of the most vulnerable workers, including the unorganized, youth laborers, and immigrants to the United States. These accomplishments were not without difficulty, navigating racial and gender considerations that, at times, perplexed the predominantly white group and its organized labor constituency. In addition to these internal struggles, NCOSH faced opposition from external sources, battling established political and economic interests that championed industry and development over workers and their communities. Even among all these challenges, NCOSH grew and adjusted over time, eventually taking on a larger role representing workers and unions throughout the state.
CHAPTER I:  
The Origins of NCOSH

On December 8, 1975, the North Carolina Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), a student directed, consumer oriented, research group with chapters present on college campuses throughout North Carolina, released a report entitled Caution: N.C. OSHA is Hazardous to Your Health. The report, which evaluated the effectiveness of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Administration (N.C. OSHA) from the period of June 1975 until October 1975, declared, “North Carolina companies do not currently provide safe and healthful working conditions for employees, and they show little inclination to move in this direction.” The study highlighted the failed practice of voluntary compliance, which had been the agency’s guiding philosophy since its inception in July of 1973. Voluntary compliance reinforced a prevailing belief among business and political leaders in North Carolina and throughout much of the South that “working conditions were already quite good … and that no stronger means or enforcement would be necessary to insure safe workplaces.”

Although North Carolina OSHA officials frequently championed safe working conditions and positive relations with industry, the PIRG report rejected these claims, illustrating a pattern of minimal inspections and poor working environments. An examination of records from N.C. OSHA showed “that 86 per cent of the companies inspected in 1974 were found to be in violation of OSHA standards,” and that follow up inspections by federal inspectors “found that 76 per cent of the workplace hazards present were not reported by N.C. OSHA inspectors who

had earlier visited the same plant.” The program of voluntary compliance featured low fines, repeated instances of lowered standards and punishments after assessing fines, superficial evaluations of company programs, and little input from employees during inspections. Offering four suggestions for improving workplace safety, the report questioned the compliance program and called for stricter enforcement policies, better work education programs, and for N.C. OSHA officials to acknowledge that it would take fifteen to twenty years for inspectors to visit every workplace at least once. The report concluded that “the passage and enforcement of occupational safety and health laws were not intended to be a blessing to employers,” it was instead for “the blessings of … working people.”

Appalled by these findings, the authors of the report, Joseph “Chip” Hughes, Jr. and Frances “Fran” Lynn, came together, alongside Hughes wife, Len Stanley, and launched the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project (NCOSH) during the spring of 1976. The group steadily grew over the course of 1976 as an infusion of members from the People’s Alliance (PA) joined the trio in helping to build a budding movement centered on occupational safety and health in North Carolina. The individuals who worked together throughout the early stages of NCOSH came from a variety of labor, medical, and organizing backgrounds. Hughes first became involved in economic justice issues in the early 1970s, quitting college and becoming a staff member of the Institute for Southern Studies (ISS). His commitment was rooted in his previous involvement with SNCC efforts in Albany, Georgia. His work at ISS provided an opportunity that

17 Ibid., 30-33.
broadened his horizons and slowly shifted his focus toward occupational issues, first with the Brown Lung Association (BLA) and later with NCOSH.\(^{19}\) Stanley came of age during the height of civil and women’s rights organizing, earning her Master’s in Public Health at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, an effort that included fieldwork focused around black lunged miners and brown lunged textile workers.\(^{20}\) Others, such as Ted Outwater, a founding member of the PA and a volunteer with NCOSH, came from a student activist background, helping to organize anti-war protests during his time as a UNC-Chapel Hill undergraduate in the late 1960s. Still others, such as Lee Guion, a member of the PA Steering Committee, got involved in NCOSH through connections to Hughes and Stanley, and a desire to help people through BLA screening clinics.\(^{21}\) NCOSH thus embodied and coalesced around a spirit of social activism; allowing young progressives, many who came of age during the tumultuous 1960s, to remain active in social change and progressive organizing, finding their niche through the arena of worker health and safety.

Although the new organization began primarily as an extension of the BLA, NCOSH broadened its focus over time to include other industries and occupational hazards that went beyond cotton dust. NCOSH thus emerged out of the research of PIRG, the activism and relations built within the BLA, and the structural mechanisms of the PA. These components,

\(\text{\footnotesize 19 Chip Hughes, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in author’s possession.}
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\(\text{\footnotesize 21 Ted Outwater, interview by Derrick Kay, January 24, 2018, NCOSH Project, transcript in author’s possession; Lee Guion, interview by Derrick Kay, August 10, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in author’s possession}
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combined with the overarching shift toward occupational health embodied in the national COSH movement, helped to lay a foundation for NCOSH during its inception in the spring of 1976.

**OSHA and the COSH Model**

The passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) in 1970 provided the initial impetus and framework for the growth of committees on occupational safety and health (COSH), local and regional coalitions that brought workers, health professionals, and legal specialists into meaningful conversations about health in the workplace. The COSH model embodied components of cooperation and education; coalitions of different people and different expertise coming together to create safer and healthier workplaces, a model championed by OSHA during the 1970s. The first group, the Chicago Area Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (CACOSH) formed in 1972 after the Chicago Chapter of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR), many union locals, and labor leaders cosponsored a conference on occupational safety and health.  

The early successes of OSHA in the workplace were captured in the article “OSHA: Dynamite for Workers,” written by Hughes and Stanley, while working for *Southern Exposure*. As part of a labor focused issue, from 1976, the couple went to Brevard, North Carolina to investigate the chemical building at Olin Corporation’s Film Division, focusing on how the passage of OSHA had allowed individuals and their union to change company policies around chemical exposures. Olin Corporation produced cellophane wrapping for many different

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products, including Frito bags and cigarette packaging. Operating in Brevard since 1951, the workers at Olin had experienced many different neurological, psychological, and physical ailments due to their close exposure to carbon disulfide ($\text{CS}_2$), a highly toxic chemical used in the cellophane making process.

Prior to 1971 and the establishment of Local 1971 of the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU), workers like Marvin Gaddy, a twenty-year veteran in the plant, would complain about hazards to the company but would be met with stark resistance, “they’d tell us to get the hell out – ‘we don’t need you. If you don’t enjoy your job, then go home’.”

The passage of OSHA, however, allowed workers to air their grievances under the threat of a federal complaint, a prospect that often scared the company into fixing issues on the shop floor. The need for education about OSHA and workplace grievance apparatuses appeared throughout the *Southern Exposure* article. Gaddy did not know initially what made him sick; however, the introduction of the union and safety committee allowed workers to uncover information about the chemicals they were using.

The research component of the OSHA Administration, embodied in the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), also opened the door for studies of harmful chemicals. For example, NIOSH began examining the effects of $\text{CS}_2$ at the Olin plant after James Reese, a maintenance man and leader of the union safety committee, filed a health hazard evaluation survey on behalf of the workers. However, Reese knew about this possibility only after attending a union training session in Richmond, Virginia. Reese meticulously memorized

24 Ibid., 75.
and utilized OSHA standards after than meeting, realizing they were the key to a safer workplace. In addition, Reese went about informing his fellow workers, explaining OSHA standards and what they could mean for their workplace. In writing this article, Hughes and Stanley identified OSHA as a means for breaking away from the voluntary compliance and “lip service” that blocked progress toward better working conditions. The two also acknowledged that, more importantly, worker education was the most powerful instrument for tackling workplace safety and health issues.25

One of the tools that emerged during the early 1970s was a booklet, produced by the Job Safety and Health Project of the Urban Planning Aid (UPA) and later by the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH). Entitled How to Use OSHA: A Workers’ Action Guide to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the publication featured information on OSHA inspections, complaints, and follow-up procedures. The emphasis on workers’ knowing their individual labor rights would be an important aspect of the educational programs and materials distributed by COSH groups. In recalling the threads and events that would lead to the formation of NCOSH, Hughes remembered this booklet and the effect it had on his mindset regarding occupational safety and health in North Carolina. After seeing and reading the book, Hughes recalled that it made him “think this is exactly what we want to do, we want to create an organization like this around health and safety issues.”26

How to Use OSHA also featured prominently in Hughes and Stanley’s article in Southern Exposure. An image of the booklet sits among a surrounding block of text that describes how to

25 Ibid, 82.
26 Chip Hughes, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
identify different substances, how to know your rights, and what types of organizations could help individuals who were looking for a safer and healthier workplace (Figure A). From Stanley’s perspective, these types of educational materials, specifically the one produced by MassCOSH, were “a guide for unions and worker groups to use … as something that they could have as a law … [and] give some strength to the claims that they had.” OSHA provided a tool for workers to utilize, but it would be effective only if workers were able to navigate its processes and use it as leverage to clean up the workplace. Among the several organizations listed in the text surrounding the booklet image was NCOSH, the group that Hughes and Stanley helped to create, a group that would embody aspects of the national COSH movement and its model of collaboration and education. This movement provided the North Carolina project with its overarching mission and the blueprint for building coalitions across the labor-professional divide.

Organizing For A Safe & Healthy Workplace

Within OSHA itself, the focus on education and empowerment over mere compliance with standards developed during the tenure of Eula Bingham, OSHA Director from 1976 until 1980. Bingham created a “New Direction” grant program that provided the means for different labor and health or safety focused groups to provide and disseminate occupational health

29 Hughes and Stanley, “OSHA: Dynamite for Workers,” 80. Used with permission from Institute of Southern Studies.
information and training. These measures broadened OSHA’s reach, allowing citizen groups to have an opportunity to disseminate the valuable information that OSHA had been researching since its official creation in 1971. During Bingham’s tenure, OSHA also produced three videos, “The Story of OSHA,” “Worker to Worker,” and “Can’t Take No More,” which all emphasize that workers have the right to expect a clean and healthy workplace. These videos, which include workplace footage interlaced with employee, union, employer, and OSHA official interviews, illustrates many of the hazards and possible solutions needed to rectify workplace safety and health issues. The ideal relationship between labor, government, and industry sat at the center of these productions, a conceptualized that would allow all three to come together and work for the common good of one another and society. The videos were widely distributed in labor circles, NCOSH receiving and loaning out copies to groups who wanted to learn more about OSHA.

OSHA initially embodied a participatory model that sought to guarantee the rights of the laborer in the workplace. Bingham’s OSHA framed workplace safety as a fundamental right, one that was mutually beneficial to employer and employee alike. Realizing that OSHA could not perform its job without the help and participation of the workforce, Bingham set out to create educational opportunities and videos to provide workers with the basic understandings of how to utilize OSHA and protect their rights to health and safety. Bingham’s efforts dovetailed directly into the COSH movement, where other COSH groups quickly began to emulate this model of cooperation, allowing the movement to grow throughout the United States.

The COSH organizations facilitated working relationships between labor, legal and medical professionals through conferences and conventions, lobbying campaigns, and the development of health-technical committees. Stanley remembered the COSH ideal as being a “dynamic force,” within unions and the workplace, one that sought to shift conversations away from mere safety and toward long-term health and wellness for workers. COSH groups expanded the power of labor through training opportunities, technical assistance, media campaigns, and the constant monitoring of actions by state or federal OSHA. Whereas unions may not have had the ability or expertise to fulfill all these roles at once, COSH groups could fill the void, expanding the collective power of workers and unions alike. Additionally, these groups often covered wide geographic areas, sharing information among workers across traditional plant or industry lines. COSH groups also advocated for the establishment of safety and health committees on the shop floor, a way of engaging labor and employers in dialogue about common workplace issues, such as chemical exposure; and how appropriate solutions, such as the use of safety equipment, can help alleviate those issues.

North Carolina Public Interest Research Group

North Carolina PIRG was established in 1972, at Duke University, to “encourage students to become involved with actual problems facing their community or state,” and to provide “a strong, independent voice for the public interest when important economic and government decisions are made.” The strategies for achieving these goals came from research

34 Ibid., 106-111.
on policy issues, analysis of their effect on the citizens of North Carolina, and advocacy of new policies that would benefit individuals in the state. PIRG dealt with issues such as public utilities regulations, rising food and prescription drug prices, and students issues, such as tenant rights, discrimination, and registering to vote. PIRG frequently published reports, such as the one with NCOSH, that highlighted underlying problems and offered recommendations for improving conditions. Beyond reports, the group relied on litigation, lobbying, and consumer awareness to bring about changes within North Carolina.\textsuperscript{35}

In a newsletter released in April of 1973, PIRG announced a focus on the conditions that laborers faced in North Carolina workplaces. Mirroring the transformation taking place within the COSH movement, PIRG was advocating for not just safety but also the long-term health of individuals in the workplace. The group felt that Congress had passed OSHA in 1970 to ensure “a safe, healthful work environment,” and that those conditions should be “considered a basic human right, one to be constantly protected.” Since OSHA included the opportunity to pass a state plan, PIRG was working with the North Carolina AFL-CIO to strengthen the language of any potential legislation, while also encouraging the N.C. Department of Labor to be held accountable under any new state OSHA guidance. Among the major concerns for PIRG was the high rate of byssinosis, or brown lung, among North Carolina textile workers. Since federal OSHA allowed complaints to be filed, like in the case of the Olin Corporation, then PIRG wanted to make “information available to textile workers around the state, in order to explain the

visions of the law [federal OSHA] and the larger part an individual can play in preventing any further threat of brown-lung disease.”

PIRG’s effort to advocate for and inform textile workers in North Carolina came about in a variety of different actions, including conferences and investigative publications. In 1975, PIRG sponsored a brown lung conference to bring together physicians, nurses, health officials, and textile industry representatives from across North Carolina. The conference featured workshops on respiratory disease, screening and diagnosis, as well as a workshop, by a N.C. official, on the state’s worker’s compensation system. The underlying principle was that a “lack of knowledge about the most serious occupational disease in North Carolina … prevented the state’s medical community from identifying and treating this problem.”

The N.C. OSHA program was also a constant target of investigation and criticism for PIRG. Although federal OSHA offered opportunities for a better workplace through complaints and inspections, the N.C. state plan emphasized voluntary compliance, which often derailed efforts to build a healthier workspace. The lack of frequent inspections and the prevalence of small fines encouraged business owners to continue to operate as they did before the state and federal OSHA plans. In the fall of 1976, PIRG followed up their initial report from December of 1975 with “N.C. OSHA – Fair and Effective? A Report to the People of North Carolina on Policies and Practices of N.C. OSHA.” This study focused especially on North Carolina’s state-

run OSHA program’s inspection site selection, penalty processes, and its regulatory balance between safety and health concerns.

The report found that N.C. OSHA inspections concentrated heavily on small employers, issued fines that discriminated against small businesses and their workers, and focused attention on diminishing workplace injuries, largely ignoring broader concerns of occupational disease. Ultimately, the report concluded that these policies were “discriminatory and/or misdirected,” and called on the citizens of North Carolina to challenge NC OSHA to become “the best (fairest and most effective) program possible.”

The joint NCOSH-PIRG report encouraged the initial development of NCOSH, and NCOSH continually utilized research and advocacy strategies similar to that of PIRG. If the state was unwilling to provide the means for a healthier workplace, then these organizations would have to investigate and educate workers themselves. The cotton dust issue, seen in the North Carolina textile industry, would become an initial rallying point for safety and health concerns throughout the 1970s.

The Brown Lung Movement

On July 20, 1974, individuals from North Carolina PIRG, South Carolina PIRG, Southern Exposure, Knoxville Brown Lung Project, and other health and legal groups from Tennessee and Georgia, alongside Bruce Raynor, an organizer with the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), came together at the Highlander Folk School in order discuss their mutual interests in

working on the issue of byssinosis, or brown lung. Although the group concluded “nothing substantial could be done about the problem of byssinosis in Southern textile mills until they were organized,” they still felt that information driven campaigns and outreach could ultimately provide some level of benefit to the unorganized textile workers. In a memo back to the TWUA, Raynor identified a plan by PIRG to develop contacts within the textile industry and to work on different types of educational programming, such as awareness campaigns and screening clinics, for brown lung. Additionally, Raynor left the conference feeling hopeful, stating, “I anticipate that eventually a good many of them [conference participants] will devote some time to the area of health and safety in the textile industry.”39

This meeting, and the United Mine Workers Brookside strike against Duke Power in 1973-1974, presented the opportunity for future organizers of the BLA to come together and begin speaking with each other about occupational safety and health. Among those involved were Sy Kahn, Charlotte Brody, Michael Szpak, Frank Blechman, Thad Moore, and Len Stanley; as well as Bob Hall, Chip Hughes and Bill Finger from the Institute for Southern Studies. These initial meetings and conversations helped to lay the foundations for the BLA; however, these organizers would focus more on textile workers after the pro-union vote at J.P. Stevens mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina in August of 1974.40

In December of 1974, a grant proposal by the BLA in Greenville, South Carolina outlined the rationale and outlook for the development of a byssinosis-based textile movement. The

39 “Re: Brown Lung Conference – Knoxville Tennessee,” Box 1, Folder 3 in the Brown Lung Association Records #4463, SHC. [Collection hereafter cited as BLA]
proposal argued that issues of “occupational health and safety” were more important to workers in the 1970s, due to OSHA legislation, than they had been in the past; and that these individuals “were no longer as willing to accept the risk of disability or death as part of the price of holding a job.” The textile industry thus offered an opportunity to organize workers around health and safety issues, particularly that of brown lung. The BLA would work under a “third force approach,” in which they would approach active and retired cotton mill workers to help them win compensation, overtly avoiding union organization themselves but laying a foundation that could allow other groups to come in and organize the workers. This approach would permit the group to work with unorganized and organized labor alike, regardless of plant location, to raise awareness and combat the occupational health problems present in the mills.41

The BLA operated in a similar fashion to a COSH group, utilizing a coalition of different organizations and activists to highlight problems within the textile industry, and apply pressure so that companies would enact meaningful reforms. To fulfill their long-term goals of “prevention of Brown Lung among healthy workers,” and “compensation to those workers already disabled by the disease,” the BLA conducted a public education campaign aimed at current and former textile workers and physicians. The Association also developed relationships with lawyers, and monitored the actions and standard setting of state and federal OSHA.42 Although limiting its scope to byssinosis and the workers affected or potentially affected by the disease, the BLA sought to raise public awareness around this issue, forcing government

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41 “Carolina Brown Lung Project, Proposal to IUD: Brown Lung Organizing in Greenville, South Carolina, 12/74,” Box 1, Folder 3 in BLA, SHC.
42 Ibid.
officials, agencies, and the broader community to engage in meaningful conversations about health in the workplace. Since many textile mills and workers labored in relatively closed and isolated systems, the BLA hoped that illuminating the issue would expand the dialogue beyond the plant and into the larger community.\(^43\)

The main “weapon of choice” for the BLA was the screening clinic, an opportunity to engage workers and educate them about their condition. The importance of this experience was underlined in the materials given to chapters to help them plan clinics, stating:

> “Every event that people participate in, every meeting is an educational experience and a group-building experience. People don’t learn just from being told or taught things, they have to experience things. And the experiences have to be repeated and they have to build on each other for people to really learn and understand. A clinic shows brown lung victims that a lot of people are on their side, that brown lung disease is important, and most of all, that a doctor or medical professional does believe they have the disease. A clinic is a big exciting event. But to use the big event well, you must involve people, and your whole community.”\(^44\)

The screening clinics would usually take place in a school auditorium or church in areas with a large concentration of mills and mill workers. Hughes and Stanley established the Erwin, North Carolina chapter of the BLA near a Burlington Mills location. Other areas, such as Roanoke Rapids with a J.P. Stevens plant, and Greensboro with a Cone Mills plant, hosted strong BLA chapters. During a screening, textile workers would sit in a large waiting area and be asked to fill out a questionnaire that included their work history and any respiratory problems or symptoms. From there, workers would have their vital signs taken, followed by a pulmonary function test. These tests, which required workers to blow into an FEV (forced expiatory volume) machine,

\(^44\) “Planning a Clinic,” Box 2, Folder 77 in BLA, SHC.
approximated the amount of lung function for each individual. After the tests were administered, the worker would then speak with a physician or physician’s assistant, with the goal being to determine the health and possible cause of decreased lung function for each patient. After receiving these results and speaking with a medical professional, BLA volunteers would try to answer questions about compensation procedures, furthering the workers’ knowledge about the issue of byssinosis.45

The BLA staff went to get lengths to plan clinics and prepare the volunteers for the screening procedure. Volunteers and medical staff were given extensive guidelines for leading individuals through the initial questionnaire and the pulmonary function screening. Stressing the fact that workers might not understand medical jargon or questions, volunteers were asked to remain calm, rephrase questions as needed, and try to make the worker feel at ease during the entire process. Similarly, those conducting the breathing tests were asked to be positive and courteous, walking their patients through each part of the examination and showing no alarm or surprise over the FEV machine reading. The interaction and the results of clinics could have a major impact on how the BLA operated in these communities, and how effective the organization was at data collection and filing compensation claims.46

The facilitation of conversations and connections between medical professionals, volunteers, and textile workers was a critical aspect of the entire process. Lee Guion, a volunteer with the BLA and NCOSH from 1976 until 1980, felt that the level of “support and care” of volunteers allowed them to reduce the isolation felt by those living in the mill communities while

46 “Administering the Brown Lung Screening Clinic Questionnaire,” Box 2, Folder 77 in BLA, SHC.
also opening the volunteers’ eyes, often young college students or recent graduates, to the wide array of hazards in workplaces throughout North Carolina. Guion, who would eventually go back to school at Durham County Community College to learn more about respiratory therapy, was first recruited as a volunteer through connections to other activists, such as Hughes and Stanley. She was initially trained to take lung function readings and track those results. However, as she became more involved in the process, Guion went along with various organizers to speak at union meetings. She specifically remembered speaking about safety clauses, encouraging workers to negotiate protections into their contracts, ensuring that companies maintained safe workplaces. Workers may have realized the need for basic safety on the job but the aspects of occupational health, a new focus of the labor movement in the 1970s, allowed the BLA to engage workers about repetitive workplace hazards and the overall well-being of the worker inside and outside of the plant. The BLA thus attempted to shift the focus toward long-term issues in the textile mill, such as cotton dust exposure that would often leave workers disabled with minimal lung function.47

Individuals, like Guion, and their involvement in screening clinics for the BLA and NCOSH highlight the initial overlapping nature of these two groups. On April 28, 1978, these two groups co-sponsored a brown lung clinic at Oakboro Baptist Church in Stanley County, North Carolina. The planning materials, referenced earlier, provide a glimpse into how a clinic would be staffed and run by members of the BLA and NCOSH. When directing local chapters on how to train individual volunteers for a clinic, the directions state that groups should “be sure

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47 Lee Guion, interview by Derrick Kay, August 10, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
that N-COSH or Brown Lung Association staff members know in advance when the training session will be, so that they can know to have appropriate equipment and training personnel there.” Additionally, NCOSH or the BLA provided organizers, who helped plan and follow up on clinics, and NCOSH generally provided the physicians for clinics. In discussing the divide, if any between early NCOSH and the BLA, Guion recalled that “the Brown Lung Association and NCOSH sort of blurred together because that was the beginning [of NCOSH].” The two groups heavily collaborated on the issue of brown lung, with staff and volunteers from both helping to facilitate many of the screenings, ten total between 1975 and April of 1978.

Beyond screening clinics, the BLA also engaged in a broad range of research and other activities such as mass workers compensation filings. In the summer of 1976, after completing his graduate studies at the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, David Austin took an internship with federal OSHA, working on a cotton dust project. The internship allowed David to work on brown lung issues, networking with people throughout North Carolina, including Hughes and Stanley. After the summer ended, his newfound contacts had been impressed with his work and helped get him hired as the Research Director for the BLA. Austin was part of an expansive role, taken on by BLA, which placed brown lung before the public as a major workplace concern.

On September 28, 1978, the BLA released a report, entitled “An Evaluation of the Cotton Dust Inspection and Abatement Activities, and the Textile Worker Education Activities

48 “Planning a Clinic,” Box 2, Folder 77 in BLA, SHC.
49 Lee Guion, interview by Derrick Kay, August 10, 2017
50 David Austin, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).” The report concluded that there was “a lack of commitment by N.C. OSHA leadership to a strong occupational health program for textile workers,” and called on the Commissioner of Labor “to make N.C. OSHA, and the new cotton dust standard, tools that textile workers can really use in their struggle for a healthy workplace.” Using their clinics as key evidence, the BLA claimed that the “vast majority” of workers who had been seen at a clinic knew very little about the hazards of cotton dust, nor did they know about OSHA or their rights in the workplace. Again, attacking voluntary compliance, as PIRG had in earlier reports, the BLA decried the “philosophy that warnings about the disease must be ‘balanced’ by pro-industry propaganda.” The report shed light on the inadequacies of occupational safety and health under N.C. OSHA, illustrating how workers were often kept from realizing their “legal right to a safe and healthy workplace” under a pro-business administration.51

Beyond reports, the BLA also looked to bring awareness to the byssinosis problem through public actions and activities. In 1975, the Greensboro chapter of the BLA held a screening clinic on November 5 at the Guilford County health department, identifying twelve individuals who had a potential for worker compensation. On November 12, the chapter traveled with forty byssinosis victims to Raleigh, notifying the press about the mass filing of their compensation claims. The large gathering allowed the BLA to advertise their goal of an efficient workers compensation system. The mass filing was followed up with a Legislative Forum on

51 “An Evaluation of the Cotton Dust Inspection and Abatement Activities, and the Textile Worker Education Activities of the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA),” Box 2, Folder 50 in BLA, SHC.
November 18, prompting the Commissioner of Labor to openly acknowledge their compensation concerns with a public letter issued on November 24.⁵² These actions provided visibility for the newly formed BLA, while also undermining the legitimacy of current workplace safety and health practices under N.C. OSHA.

On Tuesday, October 23, 1979, the Greensboro chapter held a movie screening of *Song of the Canary* at the Cloverdale Church of God in High Point, North Carolina, stating on a publicity flier that “it’s dust that you cannot see that harms your lungs – join us – for a healthy workplace.”⁵³ *Song of the Canary*, a 1979 film, chronicled the petrochemical industry in California and the cotton textile industry in the South. The film illustrated how the canary of the coal mine, in earlier years, had been transformed into the actual worker, an individual who faces constant danger and sickness within industries throughout the United States. The brown lung oriented section of the film begins with a collage of different individuals, lying in hospital beds with breathing apparatuses, as the narrator introduces the persistence of occupational safety and health issues in the textile mills of the American South. After exploring the brown lung issues in the mills, the film ends with images of workers protesting, holding signs that read “Cotton Dust Kills,” “JP Stevens took my breath away,” and lastly, “Carolina Brown Lung Association.”⁵⁴ Len Stanley remembers the BLA being a huge inspiration for the film with the filmmakers interviewing BLA members, board members, and those suffering from brown lung and other

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⁵² “November Monthly Report to the Youth Project, Washington, DC, December 4, 1975,” Box 5, Folder 205 in BLA, SHC.
⁵¹ “Active Workers,” Box 7, Folder 368 in BLA, SHC.
respiratory ailments. The film was important because “it would make the workers come alive,” and allowed individuals to see the “process or progress,” of occupational health efforts in North Carolina.55

As the BLA continued to grow and develop throughout the latter half of the 1970s, it found strength in its organizing efforts and coalitions among other groups that were also hoping to shape occupational safety and health in North Carolina and throughout the United States. After 1976, the BLA drew a lot of support and assistance from the newly founded group, NCOSH, with many overlapping members and a philosophy that included research initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and the educational empowerment of workers in North Carolina. Concerns about brown lung spurred individuals like Chip Hughes, Len Stanley, Lee Guion, and Dave Austin into action around workplace health. As they continued to organize and advocate on behalf of textile workers in the mid-1970s, they also became “exposed” to the wide array of other workplace hazards, such as chemical exposure in the rubber industry, knowledge and experience that would further manifest itself in their work within NCOSH.

The People’s Alliance

Although the BLA provided an early outlet for NCOSH activism, the People’s Alliance provided initial support and additional membership for NCOSH’s founding in 1976. The PA, initially called the People’s Alliance for a Cooperative Commonwealth, was founded in 1975 and fully operational during the summer of 1976. The group viewed itself as “an independent activist organization that seeks to unite people working for progressive changes into a majority

movement with the strength to win real victories against corporate interests and concentrated powers.” Connecting their philosophic roots to that of the Populists of 1890s North Carolina, the group sought to limit government corruption and power while supporting all individuals, from every background, with a focus on anti-corporate activities, such as political and labor organizing.56

In the opening remarks to the 1976 Founding Convention, the PA acknowledged the need for different groups to work together, especially in the realm of labor where fragmentation, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, had undermined mutual trust and respect among groups, especially among white workers, minorities, and women.57 Worries of disunity along class and racial lines led the PA to become involved with NCOSH as it conducted sessions on industrial hazards, spoke with union groups throughout North Carolina, and conducted brown lung screenings in Erwin and Roanoke Rapids.58 As a task force of the PA, NCOSH provided regular updates to members of the Steering Committee while also providing educational workshops to the group about OSHA, the rights of working people, and aspects of communication and organizing that would allow PA members to speak with and engage the laboring community.

Ted Outwater, who was a founding member of the PA and later a volunteer with NCOSH, remembered an overlap between BLA membership, NCOSH membership, and the initial PA taskforce, many of them originating from undergraduate and graduate programs at the

56 “Memo to All Active PACC Chapter and Task Force Members,” Box 1, Founding Convention, 1976 in the Durham People’s Alliance Records, North Carolina Collection, Durham County Library. [Archive hereafter cited as NCC; collection hereafter cited as PA]
58 “Opening Remarks to the Convention,” Box 1, Founding Convention, 1976 in PA, NCC.
School of Public Health in Chapel Hill. Before Lee Guion became involved in the BLA and NCOSH, she had been involved in the formation of the PA. The organization sent her to the Midwest Academy in Chicago for training in community organizing in the fall of 1975. While working to establish the PA, Guion was asked by Hughes and Stanley to become involved in the BLA to do screening clinics. Guion remained involved in all three organizations from that point forward, acting as a point of reference between the PA Steering Committee and the NCOSH task force.

Guion, however, was not unique in this role, in fact Fran Lynn, one of the founding NCOSH trio, had also been an organizer with the BLA and involved in the PA as well. Prior to David Austin becoming involved in the BLA, and later NCOSH, he first heard about the People’s Alliance and NCOSH through a talk given by Lynn during his second year as a graduate student at the School of Public Health. Austin remembered this talk being about COSH groups and Lynn’s desire to get one started in North Carolina. Outwater remembered that although NCOSH started out as a PA task force, it operated independently “relatively soon” after their initial creation. Outwater was not entirely sure why; however, he felt that the overall focus of the two groups were different. NCOSH focused on occupational hazards and the PA focused on workers as one aspect of their overall goal of changing political structures in North Carolina.

Even though NCOSH took on a life of its own, the relationship between the PA and NCOSH continued to grow over time. In 1977, NCOSH Task Force members held two different workshops for PA volunteers. The first looked to introduce volunteers to the purpose and

59 David Austin, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017.
activities of the task force, while also sharing a newly created slide show, entitled “We Pay With Our Lives.” The second workshop focused on outreach strategies and the overall relationship between NCOSH and the PA. Additionally, PA produced an educational leaflet, entitled “This Job Makes Me Sick: Occupational Safety and Health,” by Chip Hughes, which connected the collective efforts of the PA, BLA and NCOSH. The leaflet stated that “the state had always been more concerned with providing ‘a favorable business climate’ … than providing ‘a safe and healthful workplace’ to those who labor in its mills and factories,” and that many different organizations had been coming together to fight against this injustice, including, “the Carolina Brown Lung Association … the N.C. Public Interest Research Group, and N-COSH.” The brochure went on to speak about different unions throughout North Carolina and how they had been working to force N.C. OSHA to provide effective mechanisms for inspection and enforcement of safety standards. On the back, information was provided for how to contact NCOSH and three different chapters of the BLA.

Later, in 1977, the PA held a leadership development conference that featured a workshop examining the continuing relationship between NCOSH and the PA. The session began with the jointly produced slideshow “We Pay With Our Lives,” which was created by two PA members, Ted Outwater and Sue Hartnett, with the assistance of NCOSH. The session included discussions, not on occupational safety and health, but on how these aims fit into the larger goals and reach of the PA. Hand written notes from the conference illustrate the dynamics

60 “Workshops,” Box 1, Founding Convention, 1976 in PA, NCC.
61 “This Job Makes Me Sick: Occupational Safety and Health,” Box 37, North Carolina Occupational Health and Safety Project, 1977 and undated in PA, NCC.
of this conversation, that collaboration with NCOSH had most been successful and that the task force case study was very illustrative because it highlighted the concrete connections between workers, consumers, and the control of corporations, a dynamic that the PA sought to disrupt. The second convention, held in 1978, also featured the slide show and a discussion of what individuals could do in the fight for better conditions in the workplace, continuing the conversation about the relationship between NCOSH and the PA.\textsuperscript{62} NCOSH continued, throughout the early 1980s, to send a representative to PA Steering Committee meetings to provide updates on their initiatives and projects. The relationship between these two groups provided NCOSH with a growing member base while also providing an opportunity for support and the sharing of occupational safety and health information across two expanding organizations.

**North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project**

The advocacy and research of PIRG, the activism and occupational disease focused orientation of the BLA, and the initial structural and membership support of the PA, combined with the overarching turn toward occupational health and safety embodied in the COSH movement, coalesced in the spring of 1976 providing Hughes, Stanley, and Lynn the foundational pieces needed to launch NCOSH. The group’s overall mission, during these early years, was centered on OSHA and “letting people know, letting workers know, that it existed and that they had rights under it.”\textsuperscript{63} As Stanley and Hughes had learned while investigating the Olin plant in Brevard, OSHA could be used as a “tool” if workers were aware of its existence and

\textsuperscript{62} Leadership Development Conference, 1977 and Second Annual Convention, 1978, Box 1 in PA, NCC.
\textsuperscript{63} Dave Austin, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017.
how to use it to improve the health and safety of their work environment. The initial work in textiles, via the BLA, had exposed the trio to workplace health hazards; but their growing awareness of larger issues, such as chemical exposure in the Olin plant, sparked their creation of a COSH group. Ultimately, NCOSH sought to improve occupational safety and health throughout the state by using OSHA and empowering workers through educational opportunities and resources.

On May 11, 1976, a team of three NCOSH volunteers, Tema Okun, Diane Davis, and Dave Austin, made a presentation in front of the Communication Workers Union, a member of the N.C. State AFL-CIO and Fayetteville Labor Council. Although the presentation was cut short due to the meeting running late into the evening, the group spoke with several individuals afterwards, hearing their stories and answering questions as best as they could. In a write up of the meeting, the group reflected that for some “our answers were inadequate,” and that it would be ideal for NCOSH to research their questions and follow up with better answers. One of the individuals that the group encountered was Robert E. Lee, a rubber worker at the Springfield-Kelly Goodyear plant in Fayetteville. Lee had worked at the plant for seven years and was concerned with the lack of knowledge surrounding what chemicals he and his fellow workers were being exposed to. Although the plant had been inspected and cited by N.C. OSHA, prior to this May meeting, the twenty-seven recorded violations had been deemed minor and to Lee’s knowledge, none of them involved any concerns over chemical exposure.64 This meeting

64 “Notes on NCOHSP Presentation” Folder 53 in NCOSH, SHC.
between NCOSH and Lee would spark a continuing relationship, one that would lead toward a screening clinic and a closer look at chemical exposure in the Fayetteville rubber plant.

NCOSH spent much of its first year in existence trying to establish relationships among different working groups and getting their message out in front of the public. In 1976, NCOSH produced a brochure entitled “Is Your Job Making You Sick?” as a way of advertising NCOSH, its mission, and what it could provide for the workers of North Carolina (Figure 1.2). The pamphlet highlighted many of NCOSH’s educational capacities, mentioning brown lung screening clinics and occupational health hazard workshops that could be offered to unions and workers alike. The graphics within the brochure illustrate the often violent and deadly aspects of work, showing cartoon versions of individuals who are facing workplace exposure and hazards. The brochure was most likely used in conjunction with a cosponsored talk between NCOSH and the PA at the Presbyterian Student Center on December 1, 1976, and subsequently used as an advertisement as NCOSH made more connections with organized labor throughout North Carolina.66

65 Box 37, North Carolina Occupational Health and Safety Project, 1977 and undated in PA, NCC. Used with permission from Durham County Library, North Carolina Collection.
66 Ibid.
Is Your Job Making You Sick?

Figure 1.2
Initially, NCOSH was made up of volunteers, these individuals being full-time workers or students, its campaigns and advocacy was largely carried out on a part-time and spare time basis. The group primarily focused on education, medical screenings and research. In 1977, “We Pay With Our Lives,” was created through a grant by the UNC Department of Health Administration and the N.C. Humanities Committee. This slideshow required a cassette tape player and a carrousel slide projector and ran for approximately 29 minutes. The slideshow begins with the Ray Charles song, “That Lucky Old Sun,” before going into a pre-recorded narration about the different industrial problems and health issues that workers in North Carolina faced. Punctuated with different songs and interviews that connect with the dangers and plight of the working class, the slide show goes on to explain OSHA and its role in the American workplace. Among those interviewed are Robert E. Lee, the rubber worker who first encountered NCOSH at a union meeting in May of 1976. Lee was interviewed to highlight how companies like to maintain trade secrets around their chemicals, ignoring the health impact such a chemical could have workers. Although the second-to-last slide features a plug for NCOSH, the slideshow narration itself did not, only acknowledging groups “like the Black Lung or Brown Lung Association are effective in educating people and pressing for better working conditions and compensation benefits.”

After the creation of the slideshow, a second version of the brochure, “Is Your Job Making You Sick?,” was created in order to advertise “We Pay With Our Lives,” and expand upon the mission of NCOSH and what it had done and was currently doing to help workers in

67 “We Pay With Our Lives: A Slide Show,” Box 49, Folder 1929 in NCOSH, SHC.
North Carolina (Figure 1.3). This updated brochure, which was illustrated by Ted Outwater, included an updated mission that stated, “The Occupational Safety and Health Act guarantees every working man and woman the right to a safe and healthy workplace. But to insure these rights workers must insist upon them, organize for them and demand their enforcement.” This sentiment mirrors the founding ideals of Hughes and Stanley, wherein OSHA could be used as a tool to empower workers towards a healthier workplace. Instead of using violent images of workplace hazards, the brochure instead mirrors the slideshow, using happy cartoonish human figures to portray progress from the workplace into the NCOSH meeting hall on job health and safety concerns.

By April of 1978, NCOSH developed a committee that would schedule and present the slideshow or information from the brochures to union locals. The presentations would focus on “rights under OSHA, how you can inspect your work area for health and safety hazards, and what health hazards are associated with your industry.” Prior to the meetings, NCOSH would send fact sheets that covered the basics about the relationship between workers and OSHA. If requested, NCOSH would also create or send along facts sheets that pertained to a specific issue or topic, essentially offering technical assistance for unions or workers who may not have had any knowledge about the hazards or substances they were working with. These presentations allowed NCOSH to meet new union locals while providing laborers with the knowledge needed to confront occupational hazards in their workplace.

68 Box 37, North Carolina Occupational Health and Safety Project, 1977 and undated in PA, NCC. Used with permission from Durham County Library, North Carolina Collection.
69 Ibid.
70 “Dear, Is Your Job Making You Sick?,” Box 2, Folder 53 in NCOSH, SHC.
Is Your Job Making You Sick?

Figure 1.3

The inclusion of the rubber workers clinic, in the slideshow and updated brochure, illustrate how NCOSH was beginning to broaden its scope across North Carolina. NCOSH and
the members of the health and safety committee for the United Rubber Workers Union (URW) held a joint talk on hazards in a rubber tire plant in September of 1976.\textsuperscript{71} This action was followed up in March of 1977 when Lee, who had now become the president of the 1,100 member Local 959 of the URW, collaborated with NCOSH to hold a screening clinic at the plant. Although the clinic had a low turnout, more than half of those involved required medical follow up; and one individual had only 27\% of his overall breathing capacity due to exposure to unknown chemicals used during the tire manufacturing process. Chip Hughes, who helped run the screenings, told the \textit{News and Observer} “the people are being made sick by their jobs.” Ultimately, the URW hoped that the screening would provide them with statistics and potential leverage in the event of legal proceedings, and that the screening would publicize and force the company to acknowledge the chemicals used and their potential to harm the long-term health of the workers.\textsuperscript{72} This joint action gave NCOSH good publicity, providing opportunities to connect with even more labor groups in North Carolina.

Although it seemed that NCOSH had turned a corner and was developing strong relationships with unions, the rubber workers screening clinic would later be marred when one of the screening clinic doctors, a member of the Communist Workers Party (CWP), held a follow up meeting, without the knowledge of Stanley, Hughes, or other NCOSH volunteers, in which she proclaimed the necessity of workers sticking together and invited all of them to join the Communist Party. Advertising the meeting as a clinic follow-up, the young doctor spoke before a

\textsuperscript{71} “Occupational Health and Safety in a Rubber Tire Plant,” Box, Folder 53 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{72} Jim Hefner, “Union, Tire Maker Argue Hazardous Chemical Claim,” \textit{News and Observer} (Raleigh, North Carolina, March 4, 1977.)
large crowd that had come expecting to hear more information about chemical exposure at the plant and the health findings associated with those occupational issues. After the meeting, Lee called Len Stanley furious, challenging NCOSH’s ties to Communism and stating, “Well I always heard if you wallow with a dog with fleas, you’re going to have fleas.” Although Stanley adamantly denied any ties to Communism, she recognized that a small group of the doctors, from the BLA and NCOSH, were members of the CWP but that she had never expected them to call a meeting and champion the Communist cause. Lee was particularly frustrated because he felt the screening clinic had been a success and had really provided information needed to force the company to work alongside the union; however, this episode tainted those results and his credibility as President of the Rubber Workers Union (URW). Although this incident undermined ties between the URW Local 959 and NCOSH, it did not necessarily spread throughout North Carolina, limiting the damage to the Fayetteville plant and workers.73

That same month, NCOSH wrote to the Youth Project (YP), located out of Atlanta Georgia, to request $1,500 to hire a full-time employee. The organization had now existed for around a year with a limited membership of twenty individuals, the group felt it was time for an expansion in their capabilities. The initial inquiry letter stated that financial limitations had prevented NCOSH from moving beyond the Triangle, but that an infusion of money could enlarge the organization’s geographical footprint. The status of an all-volunteer group also limited efforts as people could contribute only limited amounts of time, not being able to focus fully on occupational issues. NCOSH proposed that the new staff member would be “someone

who is currently active in NCOSH and who has studied occupational safety and health through the masters of public health program at the University of North Carolina.” YP provided a grant for the latter part of 1977.74

On June 9, 1977, NCOSH announced the hiring of its first staff person, Jane Diamond, who had been a volunteer with NCOSH since its beginning and had previously studied occupational health at the School of Public Health in Chapel Hill. YP agreed to fund Diamond’s position through a $2,000 grant for her work between September 1, 1977 and December 31, 1977; however, she formally began working for NCOSH in June. She was expected to assume “organizational work involved in screenings, educationals, and research, and, by maintaining and expanding the network of contacts with unions and medical personnel,” as well as being “responsible for fundraising efforts on behalf of,” NCOSH. She would be paid a stipend of $1,340 and the remaining $660 would go toward operating costs and administrative duties. As part of the overarching agreement, Jane sent monthly reports back to the Youth Project, chronicling all the major issues and campaigns that NCOSH was dealing with.75

The hiring of Diamond and the initial seed money provided by the YP allowed NCOSH to expand its operations into a full-time enterprise, albeit with only one staffer. Working out of a small office in Durham, donated and connected with NC PIRG, NCOSH was beginning to take more shape as an organization. In her monthly report for June 1977, Diamond commented that her hiring was largely because “after a year of operation, it was felt that NCOSH needed some organizing of itself,” and therefore she spent the majority of her first month organizing the office

74 “Youth Project, March 25, 1977,” Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
75 “September 1, 1977 Youth Project Letter,” Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
and contacts of NCOSH. In chronicling her non-office activities, Diamond wrote about a brown lung screening in Erwin, North Carolina, a presentation on J.P. Stevens in Chapel Hill, a training clinic for screening volunteers, and the agreement to hold another clinic in Roanoke Rapids in July. The reports from July until October also show a strong concentration of activity on the part of or beside the BLA and its screening clinics.\(^{76}\)

One major activity beyond the BLA screening clinics was Diamond’s attendance at a national conference of COSH groups in Philadelphia from July 29-31. The meeting, which consisted of seventeen representatives from five different COSH groups, lead to the formation of a national coalition of COSH groups centered on the issue of a workers “Right to Know” in the workplace. The campaign sought “to work toward having federal OSHA adopt a standard that would require employers to: a) reveal to workers the generic names of substances they are exposed to, b) reveal to workers the contents of their company medical records, and c) reveal to workers the result of monitoring tests done on them or in their work area.” With NCOSH being the youngest of the COSH groups, Diamond volunteered the organization to coordinate the petition drive in North Carolina and volunteered to serve on a subcommittee that would seek to meet and speak with OSHA Director Bingham. Upon returning from the conference, Diamond quickly set about working with the campaign, meeting with the President of the N.C. AFL-CIO, Wilbur Hobby, and getting his endorsement for the right-to-know campaign. Diamond also contacted John Brooks, the North Carolina Commissioner of Labor, to discuss the national movement and concern around chemical exposure and health hazards. Diamond also distributed

\(^{76}\) Ibid.
petitions to the other NCOSH members, orienting the organization toward attempts to reform OSHA standards on the national level.\textsuperscript{77}

In late October, the COSH groups reconvened together, this time at the American Public Health Association conference in Washington, D.C. The group discussed their strategies and ideas going forward and met with representatives from the national AFL-CIO as well as Eula Bingham, Director of OSHA. Six months later, in July of 1978, OSHA passed medical access regulations that stipulated that employers must provide access to relevant employee exposure records and employee medical records upon request. The initial triumph of the right-to-know campaign was aided by NCOSH’s collection of over 1,200 signatures within North Carolina. These regulations would in turn become official OSHA standards in August of 1980, allowing any worker to access their personal medical records and records of employee exposure and health hazard measurements.\textsuperscript{78}

In North Carolina, the N.C. AFL-CIO and BLA urged workers to take advantage of the new regulations and request their personal records and exposure information. David Austin encouraged all workers to be aware of occupational health problems, not just in the textile industry. In a write up, appearing in NCOSH’s quarterly newsletter, Austin stated that “Thousands of N.C. workers are exposed to other toxic substances like asbestos, benzene, lead, and silica,” and that although some industries seemed safer than others, “workers … are unaware of the hazards they’re exposed to.” In a reflection of the slowly repairing relationship between the URW Local 959 and NCOSH, Robert Lee is also quoted, stating that the right-to-know did

\textsuperscript{77} “Monthly Report, July,” in Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{78} “Worker’s Right to Know Still Up in the Air,” \textit{NCOSH Reports}, January 1979 in Folder 310 in NCOSH, SHC.
not represent a full victory and that labeling standards or complete lists of industrial chemicals were still needed and should be required to keep workers safe. Through the right-to-know campaign, NCOSH engaged with OSHA, alongside other COSH groups, to challenge the current standards and enact meaningful workplace reforms.\textsuperscript{79}

In the backdrop of the developing right-to-know campaign, questions swirled about NCOSH’s ability to be an effective organization. In August of 1978, NCOSH applied for a VISTA grant, hoping to expand their volunteer base.\textsuperscript{80} The application was also sent to YP because they had renewed Diamond’s stipend beyond December 1977. In response to the VISTA Request, the YP sent NCOSH a letter of concern, asking them to sign a new agreement that spelled out the exact terms of their grant relationship. YP was concerned with the “viability” of NCOSH, primarily because it lacked organizational structure and direction. The four points of concern involved membership and dues, issue identification and strategies, board compositions and elections, as well as fundraising plans.

These points were reiterated again, in October, when Diane Jones Wilson, Director of the Southern Office of the Youth Project, wrote to the NCOSH Board about issues and concerns with their use of volunteers over the course of late 1977 and early 1978. Feeling that conversations between Diamond and other VISTA volunteers were not reaching the Board level, YP decided to write the Board directly. The letter stated:

“The most obvious concern was the absence of a clearly identifiable program that NCOSH could develop, expand and that would stand independent of Carolina Brown

\textsuperscript{79} “Right-To-Know Victory,” \textit{NCOSH Safety and Health News}, October/November 1980 in Folder 314 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{80} “To: YP Projects,” Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
Lung. It was imperative that NCOSH be able to outline a program that had the potential for addressing the occupational safety and health issues outside of the textile industry.”

The letter went on to say that the current guidance given to YP supported staff members was not enough; although NCOSH had somewhat shifted away from screening clinics, its move toward community organizing, without proper training, was inadequate. The letter also criticized the “degree of involvement and support of NCOSH’s Board and members,” as well as the current lack of fundraising plans or campaigns. At the end of the letter, YP stated the seriousness of their concerns and that a lack of fundamental changes would ultimately sever their financial relationship.81

By November of 1978, the NCOSH Board had formulated a broad outline of their plans and sent that information back to the YP. The Board questioned the critical approach of YP stating that they did not know the initial hiring of Diamond, via their funds, represented a probationary period and that they felt they should retain the two staff members as proposed in the VISTA grant. Downplaying their overlapping role with the BLA, and attempting to show a past connection but not a fully integrated relationship, the letter tried to illustrate the viability of NCOSH, specifically highlighting the localized work and multiple points of collaboration with the URW in Fayetteville. Outlining an agenda that included work with the state AFL-CIO, as well as more research and technical assistance focused campaigns, the board felt that it could expand its programming and draw in new support and funds. That goal would solidify in 1979

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81 “The Youth Project October 9, 1978,” Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
and 1980 as NCOSH received a grant from the National Science Foundation and New Directions funding from OSHA.82

**Conclusion**

The North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project emerged in 1976 as a response to concerns about the health and well-being of workers throughout North Carolina. The founding trio, Chip Hughes, Len Stanley, and Fran Lynn, hailed from progressive and labor organizing backgrounds, channeling their past involvement and passion for the plight of labor into this newfound organization. These three did not operate in a vacuum and the COSH group they created relied heavily on experiences gleaned from PIRG, the BLA, PA, and the COSH model. Embodying a program that sought to engage OSHA on the federal and state level, and become an educational resource for labor in North Carolina, NCOSH set out to define itself in the early period, remaining connected but slowly emerging out of its preliminary organizational partnerships.

Attracting young, progressive individuals who were sympathetic to labor, especially those affiliated with the North Carolina School of Public Health, helped the initial group to form and take shape. However, NCOSH’s proximity to the BLA hindered its early development, limiting its focus to cotton dust and screening clinics, shielding the organization from other labor contacts and issues that would become necessary in building and sustaining a more extensive coalition in North Carolina. As NCOSH’s vision widened and new issues, such as economic development, were taken up, the group slowly expanded, a transformation that solidified during the early 1980s. In

82 “November 4, 1978,” Box 2, Folder 62 in NCOSH, SHC.
studying the origins of NCOSH, it is imperative to understand that many different threads coalesced during the mid-to-late 1970s. Although NCOSH would grow to be a strong advocate in partnership with organized labor in North Carolina, its humble beginnings show an organization that slowly found its way amidst a growing conversation about the role of occupational safety and health in the North Carolina workplace.
CHAPTER II: 
Funding and Growing NCOSH in the 1980s

On September 18, 1979, eighteen members and volunteers of NCOSH gathered to establish the goals and expectations for the organization going forward. The meeting was held during a transitory time for the group, one in which membership had begun to lag as the group pivoted toward more research and establishing connections with non-textile labor groups.83 Renewing their commitment and vision, the group decided that their collective goal would be to “build an occupational health group which will work to eliminate occupational hazards in N.C.” This goal would be achieved through four broad steps: getting labor involved, educating health providers, profiling occupational hazards, and enlarging their screening clinics to include more workers and communities as well as potentially broadening out into new, yet undefined occupational hazards. The attendees divided these ideas into working groups, developing action plans for how each of these things could be achieved over time. In their discussions of these priorities and tasks, the members realized that they had very little information about the local labor climate in North Carolina, and that this lack of knowledge was preventing them from making stronger connections to organized labor and having a greater impact on occupational safety and health in the state.

The fourth working group, which included developing plans for continued or new screening clinics, decided to put their action plan into work immediately. They met again on September 24 to iron out plans for a joint BLA-NCOSH textile clinic scheduled for late

83 “Science for Citizens Residency, First Quarter Report,” in Box 2, Folder 55 in the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project Records #4578, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [Archive hereafter cited as SHC; collection hereafter cited as NCOSH].

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September in Smithfield, North Carolina. The group decided to create posters and leaflets for the event, a chance to include more educational components that highlighted the connections between brown lung ailments and other occupational health hazards. The materials included information on the workers’ compensation system, why companies allowed these diseases to flourish, and how lives change when people are afflicted by occupational illnesses. Mirroring the developing focus of NCOSH, the screening group also wanted to approach textile workers and see if they were interested in speaking with other workers from different industries, hopefully drawing common connections between disparate sets of laborers. NCOSH incorporated their budding identity into the established Brown Lung screening model, stressing the need for education and collaboration across workplace boundaries. After the Smithfield clinic, the working group continued to include these new educational aspects, incorporating textile workers into a larger conversation about occupational health across industries, in future screenings, including one in High Point, North Carolina in late October 1979.84

The September meeting and the subsequent screening clinics represent a turning point for NCOSH, allowing it to begin to develop its own identity among the many different groups that had inspired and supported its genesis. The initial connections and relationships to a broad group of like-minded, progressive organizations had allowed NCOSH to develop. However, for NCOSH to become the organization it strived to be, the members needed to map out their own strategy for success. The proposed plans for NCOSH solidified in the 1980s as NCOSH developed more connections with organized labor and began to engage private funding

84 “NCOSH Strategy Meeting, Sept. 18, 1979,” Box 2, Folder 46 in NCOSH, SHC.
organizations, such as the Zachary Smith Reynolds Foundation (ZSRF) and Mary Babcock Reynolds Foundation (MBRF), which provided the resources needed to address issues of economic development, local right-to-know ordinances, and repetitive motion problems in the workplace.

The acquisition of funding, initially from the federal government and later through private foundations, coupled with an overt move toward working alongside union locals and organizing around statewide issues, which would affect all workplaces, allowed NCOSH to develop its organizational identity and capacities, permitting the group to move out of the shadow of its early beginnings. During the 1980s, NCOSH grew from a small group of volunteers on the fringes of the North Carolina labor movement into a dynamic organization that helped frame the conversations and debates around occupational safety and health in the state.

Asbestos

In January 1979, NCOSH published its first newsletter, NCOSH Reports, featuring an article entitled “Asbestos – the Silent and Invisible Killer,” which chronicled the growing awareness of asbestos exposure as an occupational disease and carcinogen. Citing information released by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in April 1978, NCOSH reiterated that federal experts had “linked asbestos to as much as 17 percent of all cancer cases expected in the country over the next few decades,” and estimated that “nearly 8-11 million workers have been exposed to asbestos in the U.S. since the beginning of W.W. II.”

These findings sparked public concern and that alarm continued to grow when the Washington Post released a report, in

November 1978, claiming that two of the nation’s largest asbestos companies purposefully hid evidence and documentation concerning the fatal effects of exposure on workers throughout the industry. The mounting anxieties and swirling accusations prompted NCOSH to embark on a campaign to examine asbestos issues in North Carolina, a project that illuminated the organization’s potential to take on non-textile campaigns and underscored its weaknesses in framing occupational safety and health in the state.

Throughout the spring of 1979 David Austin wandered the streets of Durham, visiting automobile repair shops and asking mechanics how they completed brake lining work and if they wore protective equipment or masks. This effort, mirrored by PIRG volunteers in Greensboro, represented an effort to collect data and understand asbestos exposure hazards in North Carolina. That same year, NCOSH received a National Science Foundation (NSF) Grant, through Austin, to determine the extent of occupational health hazards throughout North Carolina, how aware workers were of exposure issues, and how information might best be disseminated among different labor organizations.

In his NSF proposal, Austin declared “the organization, interpretation, and dissemination of existing scientific information concerning occupational health hazards … is inadequate,” especially in a state like North Carolina where “a low-wage and low unionization industrial structure, and periodic high unemployment,” tended to downplay the hazards present in the workplace. These conditions meant that data was needed to fully understand the issues and

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87 Documents in Box 2, Folder 55, in NCOSH, SHC.; David Austin, interview with Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in author’s possession.
impact of specific occupational hazards on the community and its overall health. Utilizing his background with brown lung and byssinosis data, Austin proposed a model that would forgo reported occupational data and instead gather reliable information on diseases, determine the relationship between exposure and health, and then generate predictions about the overall effect of these issues within the community. For example, Austin mentioned that the rate of byssinosis was reportedly low in North Carolina but studies had found that 10-40 percent of active workers had the condition. The reported numbers also left out retired or disabled workers, which meant that estimates missed the overall pervasiveness of occupational hazards. The NCOSH study would thus create accurate data that would map the prevalence of industrial hazards in the state, allowing officials to develop community planning and development strategies that could potentially mitigate occupational diseases.

In the proposal, Austin also acknowledged that groups, such as N.C. AFL-CIO and NCOSH, wanted to research and publicize these issues; however, they lacked the proper resources to fully address the issue. Addressing NCOSH directly, Austin stated that as “primarily a volunteer organization,” it currently lacked “access to the scientific expertise necessary to carry out … activities.” Austin also commented on the low participation of labor within the N.C. OSHA system. He felt that education was key, and that workers would be better involved in policy making if they were aware of the hazards that surrounded them and then taught how to utilize that information, a reiteration of the NCOSH vision. The funding would thus allow for a methodical understanding of the occupational landscape while also providing epidemiological statistics, information that NCOSH volunteers could be trained on and then disseminate to other groups, including workers. Austin envisioned his collected data being used to write articles and
leaflets while also framing educational programming, such as medical screening clinics.\(^{88}\) The proposal mirrored NCOSH efforts and the eventual acquisition of the grant allowed NCOSH to begin developing a better capacity for understanding a wide range of occupational diseases.

In the first few months after receiving the grant, Austin began working with N.C. PIRG staff whom he had approached regarding his research efforts surrounding the NSF project. Both groups had noticed the prevalence of asbestos in North Carolina workplaces, and the surrounding publicity from the HEW and Post reports had put asbestosis at the forefront of occupational concerns. These conversations led Austin to decide that asbestos would be the “trial substance” he would use to estimate exposure rates in the state. As the groups continued to work together, they decided to collaborate on an independent study to explore where and how workers were exposed to asbestos, to what levels were they exposed, and how effective N.C. OSHA had been in identifying probable exposures and inspecting workplaces for potential abatement.\(^{89}\) In addition to interviewing brake workers in Greensboro and Durham, the groups also requested and inspected N.C. OSHA files related to those workplaces. They found that N.C. OSHA had completely ignored these areas of secondary exposure, providing no abatement measures nor educational services in any of those workplaces.\(^{90}\)

The joint NCOSH-PIRG asbestos project also featured prominently in a Cancer and the Toxic Environment conference held by N.C. PIRG on May 19, 1979. Austin and another

\(^{88}\) “Occupational Health Hazards in North Carolina – Research/Education Proposal,” in Box 2, Folder 55 in NCOSH, SHC.

\(^{89}\) “Science for Citizens Residency, First Quarter Report,” in Box 2, Folder 55 in NCOSH, SHC.

\(^{90}\) “Results of N.C. OSHA and the N.C. Industrial Commission Programs,” in NCOSH Reports, July 1979 in Box 9, Folder 313 in NCOSH, SHC.
NCOSH staff member, Alan Weiner, helped develop the agenda, gather up the necessary speakers, and advertised the events among members and groups that NCOSH regularly interacted with. The two also conducted two workshops, during the event, on asbestos exposure, utilizing the information that NCOSH and PIRG gathered throughout early 1979. The conference also featured Manfred Walters, president of Chemical Workers Union (CWU) at the Raybestos Manhattan textile plant in Marshville, North Carolina. During the inspection of N.C. OSHA files, Austin found out that the CWU had fought with N.C. OSHA over federal asbestos standards in their plant. Walters represented workers who had utilized OSHA as a tool to fight against asbestos exposure in the workplace. Three weeks after the conference, NCOSH and PIRG released their study on asbestos exposure in North Carolina, entitled “Cancer and White Lung – The Plight of North Carolina’s Asbestos Workers”.  

The September planning meeting thus represented an interesting juncture for NCOSH and its membership. The NSF grant expanded its capacities while simultaneously narrowing the focus of the group toward research endeavors. For Austin, this transition represented a necessary but worrying development, one that was needed for NCOSH to realize its full potential as a supporter of labor in North Carolina. The group needed data on occupational hazards in the state but the shift toward a research focus shrunk the pool of involved volunteers, leaving the limited staff to conduct much of the necessary legwork. Up until this point, NCOSH had only sporadically been able to connect with labor because it did not understand the full dimensions of

91 “Science for Citizens Residency, First Quarter Report,” in Box 2, Folder 55 in NCOSH, SHC.; “Asbestos Exposure Fought by Union,” in NCOSH Reports, July 1979 in Box 9, Folder 313, NCOSH, SHC.
occupational health and safety beyond the textile industry. The grant thus provided the means for studying the larger occupational issues that workers faced throughout North Carolina.

The initial focus was on asbestos exposure but by the end of 1979, NCOSH had further examined byssinosis while also conducting studies on silicosis, cancer and carcinogen exposures, and other occupational diseases. This research culminated in “Occupational Health as a Community Concern – A New Role for North Carolina Health Planning Agencies,” a final report that provided preliminary estimates of the occurrence of occupational diseases in North Carolina, described the specific disease related problems and their overall magnitude, and offered planning activities that would begin to address and alleviate these problems in communities throughout the state.\(^\text{92}\) The research fulfilled the initial goal developed during the September planning meeting, creating a new and lasting foundation that was built on knowledge and expertise about occupational hazards and the labor situation in the state. With a broader understanding of workplaces, beyond textiles, NCOSH could begin to connect with workers in other industries and develop its core mission around the integration of their expertise with collaborative efforts that engaged labor, particularly unions, throughout the state.

**New Directions**

The transition and orientation of NCOSH toward the broader concerns of labor at the beginning of the 1980s was further supported through OSHA funding via Eula Bingham’s New Direction program. The OSH Act, passed in 1970, included a section on Training and Employee Education, which directed OSHA to “provide for the establishment and supervision of programs

\(^\text{92}\) “Occupational Health as a Community Concern – A New Role for North Carolina Health Planning Agencies,” in Box 2, Folder 63, in NCOSH, SHC.
for the education and training of employers and employees in the recognition, avoidance, and prevention of unsafe or unhealthful working conditions in employments covered by this Act." 93

The earliest iterations of training programs relied on the direct training of OSHA staff then moved toward contractual training, utilizing the National Safety Council and then university programs to reach employers and employees. These early programs tended to be short term and limited with no design toward long term sustainability. By the mid-1970s, OSHA had shifted away from direct training and toward curriculum development, meaning educational resources could be distributed from OSHA and then utilized by the public and private sectors alike. In 1977, OSHA re-evaluated its training philosophy, underscoring the need to develop institutional capacity and competency, a reflection of Bingham’s insistence on allowing citizen groups to have a stake and opportunity in workplace safety and health. 94

The New Direction program embodied this philosophy, allowing organizations “to develop institutional competence,” and “to provide occupational safety and health training to workers and employers.” OSHA created two types of grants, planning and development, which groups could apply for to develop the infrastructure and competence necessary for long term occupational safety and health changes. Planning grants were given to groups that showed potential but needed to assess their capabilities and resources. The completion of a planning grant allowed a group to apply for development funding, meaning that they had established


internal capacities and now wanted to continue toward becoming an effective and self-sustaining group.\textsuperscript{95}

In the fall of 1979, NCOSH submitted a proposal for a New Direction planning grant. In providing context to the labor situation in North Carolina, the proposal stated:

“North Carolina presents many paradoxes to an organization whose goal is to provide occupational safety and health education and training. While it is the eighth most industrialized state, its workforce is predominantly rural and unorganized, with 39% employed in business establishments of less than 49 employees and with less than 7% of the industrial workforce organized. In North Carolina this increasing industrial development, the relatively unorganized workforce, the lack of historical patterns of worker advocacy (or community support for) better working conditions, and the ineffectiveness of existing programs of occupational health education have created a great need for new approaches to occupational health education. Because much of the workforce is unorganized the approach must recognize the need for one-to-one contacts, building to small group educational activities, and with involvement of community organizations where possible.”

Although acknowledging the need for outreach among unorganized workers, the proposal outlined a plan that focused directly on union local relationship development with a smaller focus on developing an outreach model for unorganized labor. The goal was to create an outreach model that would connect with asbestos workers, particularly in secondary exposure areas, and another group to be selected over the course of the planning year. NCOSH wanted to strengthen its ability to respond to worker health requests, while also continuing the needs assessment process, which began under the NSF grant and was codified during the September strategy meeting. Ultimately, the planning grant would allow NCOSH to prepare to respond to the interconnected needs of North Carolina, namely, awareness and motivation building, substantive education, technical assistance in organization building, and lastly, resources and

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 38-40.
materials, allowing the group to effectively collaborate with and mobilize labor in North Carolina.\footnote{“Community-Based Plan for Occupational Safety and Health Education,” in Box 17, Folder 632 in NCOSH, SHC.}

The planning funding, which was received in August 1980 and provided $25,000 in seed money, proved crucial to the institutional development of NCOSH, particularly in its engagement with organized labor in North Carolina. In September, NCOSH hired a full-time coordinator, William “Dub” Gulley, and a half-time administrator, Linda Daniel, with hopes of increasing their ability to respond to and connect with laboring groups. Prior to being hired by NCOSH, Gulley previously worked in community and neighborhood based organizing, including helping the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSME) on a campaign to organize Duke Medical Center in the late 1970s. In reflecting on his hiring, Gulley recalled being hired to “try and bring in the labor, the union side of the occupational coalition.”\footnote{Dub Gulley, interview by Derrick Kay, August 8, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.}

Daniel had previously worked as a research journalist, and had experience with the creation and editing of educational materials. She would craft the existing newsletter and other outgoing materials to be more attractive to workers and organized labor.\footnote{“October 10, 1980 – Quarterly Progress Narrative,” Box 4, Folder 122 and “Designate Professional Staff,” Box 17, Folder 633 in NCOSH, SHC.}

In addition to hiring new staff, NCOSH also set about establishing a Labor Advisory Board (LAB), which met for the first time in November 1981. The LAB began with six organizers or workers from union locals, and quickly grew to ten individuals from nine locals by January 1982. During the November meeting, the group shared their experiences in health and safety while also discussing the organizational focus of NCOSH. Additionally, the group
discussed the electronic industry, choosing it as an unorganized field that could provide a model much like the work NCOSH was doing with asbestos exposures. The November meeting was followed up by another meeting in January, which included a commitment to building communication with NC OSHA, leading to a joint meeting of the LAB with the Commissioner of Labor in February.  

The LAB would further transform during a meeting, in early July, in which the labor advisory members met with the health membership to form a joint board of directors that provided equal representation to the two groups. NCOSH hailed the creation of a joint-board as a “path-breaking step toward solidifying NCOSH as a true coalition of N.C. trade unionists and health, legal, and technical professionals.” This arrangement solidified NCOSH as a true COSH, unifying organized labor and health professionals so that the two groups could effectively work together to tackle occupational safety and health problems. Speaking for the group, Claiborne Ellis, a LAB member and Business Manager of the Operating Engineers Local 465, commented “we’ve got to get together more effectively, so we’ll understand each other’s situations … and so we can present a united front. There are a lot of serious health hazards in N.C. … and NCOSH has an important role to play.”

99 Quarterly Reports in Box 4, Folder 122 in NCOSH, SHC.
100 The first NCOSH Joint Board included Clark Steed (APWU), Karen Lewis (RWU), Laura Williams (UFCW), Ted Stevenson (CWA), Ruth Phipps (N.C. AFL-CIO), Robert Lane (Statewide Machinists), Buck Humphries (BLA), Clairborne Ellis (Operating Engineers), Len Stanley (UNC), Mindy Oshrain (Duke Medical School), Rick Maas (NCSU Professor), Kay Lovelace (UNC), Jas Gettes (UNC), Rick Elion (Physician Duke Family Medicine), and Lynn Creamer (NC Student Rural Health Coalition).
Having completed their work under the planning grant, NCOSH applied and received a year of developmental funding from OSHA in the summer of 1981. The proposal laid out the framework that was necessary for NCOSH to reach its targeted audiences: employees in small, high hazard firms, such as people who do brake work; employers and employees in new, high technology industries, such as microelectronics; and individuals who requested assistance through a referral or through leadership in the Advisory Board. These groups marked a subtle shift from the planning proposal, largely forgoing unorganized worker outreach and instead looking to focus on broader industries and connections with organized labor. The data in the proposal, which outlined efforts from 1981, illustrates why NCOSH might have shifted its focus toward organized groups.

NCOSH held six workshops on health and safety techniques during the year and worked with a total of fifty-one workers, forty-three from unions and eight from unorganized workplaces. Workshops required coordination with union locals, a gathering of expertise on an issue or industry, and staff that were trained to lead and run the event. These considerations made workshops time consuming but also provided the means for relationship building and prolonged contact between NCOSH and laborers. In providing technical assistance, NCOSH provided fifty-five total “services,” twenty-three to organized workers and thirty-two to unorganized ones. Technical requests needed very little infrastructure and required the worker to reach out to NCOSH for assistance and information, something that organized and unorganized labor alike took advantage of. Furthermore, most assistance requests came in the form of phone calls or letters, meaning NCOSH had limited and short interactions with those who needed the help.
Although NCOSH clearly wanted to help all workers, the group focused the bulk of its organizing and outreach efforts, including workshops, mailings, and clinics on union locals.\textsuperscript{102}

Throughout the developmental funding year, which ran from August 1, 1981 until July 31, 1982, NCOSH continued to develop and grow as an organization. The first full board was elected in November, which included Len Stanley among the health professionals. NCOSH began to take on a wide variety of projects, launching a study on industrial recruitment, adding scores of new union locals, and co-sponsoring conferences with the Communication Workers of America (CWA) on the dangers of stress and job pressure as well as highlighting the hazards of using video display terminals (VDTs), a growing issue as computers began to proliferate in the workplace.\textsuperscript{103} These efforts allowed NCOSH to reach more workers while also establishing connections with United Electrical Workers (UE), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) to continue to grow their union base. The First Annual Membership Convention, held in November of 1982, brought together the “new and old NCOSH members,” to discuss industrial development, VDTs, right-to-know, and the creation of health and safety committees within union locals.\textsuperscript{104}

An underlying directive of the New Directions funding was the movement toward becoming a self-sufficient, organized resource center for occupational safety and health. In hopes of diversifying its funding base, NCOSH submitted a proposal to the Mary Babcock Reynolds Foundation (MBRF), in March 1980, requesting financial support for the creation of a technical

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{I. Project Summary,”} in Box 17, Folder 633 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{CWA Tackles Stress, VDT’s,”} in \textit{NCOSH Safety and Health News}, July 1982 in Box 9, Folder 323 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{“First Annual Membership Convention,”} \textit{NCOSH Safety and Health News}, December 1982 in Box 9, Folder 325 in NCOSH, SHC.
assistance and education program that targeted health care providers. The group felt that it had proved its capability and had begun to understand the landscape of labor in North Carolina, citing their recently released joint-PIRG asbestos report and the NSF report on health in the community. Since the New Direction grant focused on training employees, NCOSH wanted extra funds to target health care providers, raising awareness of occupational hazards in the state, particularly cancer, through targeted education for that group of people. This proposal was ultimately rejected, leaving NCOSH with only the New Directions funding source.105

Between 1981 and 1982, NCOSH worked diligently to increase the organization’s ability to fund itself over time. NCOSH applied and received 501(c)(3), nonprofit, status and began to sell subscriptions to their newsletters. The board also began a discussion about how to turn membership into funding sources, debating whether union locals should provide money upfront based on per capita membership or whether to establish a service fee model. Eventually, the group settled on a per capita fee, charging unions a nominal fee for the inclusion of their membership and participation in technical or research services. Lastly, NCOSH continued to broaden its funding sources, applying for grants from other foundations, receiving money from the MBRF, for the first time, in January 1982.106

As the developmental year ended in late July 1982, NCOSH applied for another year of New Directions funding, hoping to continue to grow their budding enterprise. This time, however, NCOSH received a rejection notice, dated August 6, 1982, which commented that “Proposals were received from 49 organizations requesting over $6.5 million, with only $2.9

105 “April 22, 1980,” in Box 25, Folder 854 in NCOSH, SHC.
106 “Cost Sharing,” in Box 17, Folder 633 in NCOSH, SHC.
million available for reward,” and that the top priority for receiving funds was for an organization to show the “best capacities for carrying out occupational safety and health education programs.” NCOSH was not alone in these cuts, Maryland’s COSH and Rhode Island’s COSH groups were partially funded for 1982, and COSH groups in Philadelphia, Massachusetts, Chicago, and Santa Clara were put on hold at reduced funding levels going into 1982. Overall, the New Directions budget went from $5.8 million in 1979, up to $13.5 million in 1981 with President Jimmy Carter requesting another increase to $16.2 for 1982. However, the Reagan administration revised those numbers downward and the program received $6.9 million in 1982, 1983, and 1984.

The loss of funding was a setback to NCOSH, but the New Directions program had provided an excellent opportunity for the organization to mature. Reflecting on the period between 1980 and 1982, Gulley recalled very few unions being involved prior to the 1980s, remembering the time as a “gearing up period,” one in which “things were gearing up, at the board level, at the membership level, at the organizing level.” By the time he left NCOSH in late 1982, the membership had grown to include over 30 union locals and many new health and technical professionals. For Gulley, the importance of these accomplishments was not necessarily in the recruitment of new members but in the relationships and cross-class connections that they embodied. Medical professions and union workers did not always see eye to eye on an issue but they were able to come together and share information, legitimizing the

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107 “6 Aug 1982,” in Box 17, Unnumbered folder in NCOSH, SHC.
research on one hand and the hazards workers faced on the other. These connections allowed NCOSH to become “a coalition force to be reckoned with,” one that began having a larger impact on occupational safety and health in North Carolina.

Through the acquisition of private funding sources, primarily grants from the MBRF and ZSRF, NCOSH sustained itself and continued its work in occupational safety and health. The New Directions funding helped to solidify the structure and focus of the organization, preparing the group for the issues, such as economic development, local right-to-know ordinances, and repetitive motion injuries, that they would tackle throughout the remainder of the 1980s. The critical period, between 1980 and 1982, established much of the conversation that continued throughout the decade.

**Economic Development**

In August 1981, North Carolina Governor James “Jim” Hunt Jr. wrote a newspaper column that outlined his thoughts on the recruitment of the microelectronics industry into the state. Earlier that year, Governor Hunt had urged the General Assembly to pass a $24.4 million-dollar bill that allocated funds for a Microelectronics Center in North Carolina, a “magnet for the microelectronics research and development companies.” Hunt felt that the technology industry could provide highly skilled and high-paying jobs without the geographic limitations seen in other places, such as Silicon Valley. Espousing views that recruiters had used throughout the twentieth century to attract industry throughout the South, Hunt acknowledged that North Carolina “is attractive to most industries already,” because it provided the “overall atmosphere

| 109 Dub Gulley, interview by Derrick Kay, August 8, 2017. |
| 110 “Inside NCOSH,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, December 1982 in Box 9, Folder 325 in NCOSH, SHC. |
desired by all industry.” This environment included a physical landscape that would not become overcrowded and the presence of other industrial investment, including $8.5 billion since 1977. This industry would bring higher paying jobs and help increase North Carolina’s low per capita income, which sat in the bottom fifth of states. Ultimately, microelectronics represented a “key,” one that could unlock a better future for the people of North Carolina.111

NCOSH rejected Hunt’s line of reasoning, critiquing the possibility of microelectronic manufacturing as an example of industry chasing and worker exploitation. On the surface Hunt’s column does indeed show why the microelectronics industry would be important to North Carolina. However, reading these statistics from a profit maximization standpoint, illustrates the prevalence of a rural, low-wage workforce that was in dire need of steady jobs, a perfect combination for attracting a new, exploitative industry. In late 1981, NCOSH ran two articles, entitled “Microelectronics: Promise or Pandora’s Box,” and “Macro Health Problems,” which questioned the appropriation of public money toward private businesses and the perceived cleanliness of the electronic industry. For NCOSH, the growth of such an industry “fit in all too well with the industries in this state that offer low pay and poor working conditions to semi-skilled workers.” Furthermore, utilizing information complied by NIOSH, the research arm of OSHA, NCOSH commented that workers had been found to often suffer from “mouth blisters, kidney and liver pain, nausea, and severe headaches,” even when workers were exposed to safe limits of hazardous chemicals. For NCOSH, the microelectronic industry represented another

low-wage, highly hazardous industry that promised, but would not deliver a better life for workers in the state.

The worries of NCOSH were not without merit. In October 1980, workers at the Cabletronics plant, in Durham, North Carolina, held an election hoping to unionize as an affiliate of the Operating Engineers (IUOE). The electronic workers, who were mostly black women, had hoped union representation would yield better pay and working conditions; however, after the affirmative union vote, the company laid off half of its workforce, effectively undercutting the unionization effort. In interviews with the former employees, NCOSH found their average pay to be between $3.30 to $3.50 per hour, working within a plant with no ventilation system, ill-fitting safety glasses, and ever-present chemical fumes. While investigating the conditions around the plant, NCOSH also discovered that N.C. OSHA inspected the plant earlier that year, citing the company for not taking measurements of air quality and lead saturation. After a six-month abatement period, the company decided to start monitoring exposures. However, NCOSH and the workers felt that it was too little, too late and that the company had been operating “business as usual,” even with the threat of further inspections and worker complaints piling up within the plant. In April of 1981, the plant closed its door, leaving eighty women with no work, prompting NCOSH to ask for donations in support for the workers who had worked at Cabletronics.¹¹²

The decision to challenge the economic development strategy of Governor Hunt allowed NCOSH to engage in a broad policy initiative that would affect unorganized and organized workers alike in North Carolina. Gulley felt that the General Assembly tended to downplay any

health or safety issues that were brought up, and therefore NCOSH sought to bring a public voice to these problems, especially through their health professional membership. Whenever the state would hold events or presentations, such as they did on microelectronics, NCOSH would attend as professional commentators, pressing the politicians about exposure levels and safety equipment. The goal was not necessarily to outright change minds, it was to “muddy the water,” present a counter-narrative to the idealized models of economic development.  

In June 1981, NCOSH sponsored a “Citizen’s Hearing,” in Raleigh which allowed interested groups, such as the League of Women Voters, Brown Lung Association, Triangle Regional Planners, and NCOSH to voice their displeasure with and their concerns for the development of the microchip industry. Among the different testimonies heard were that of a former electronic worker who shared her exposure experiences in a plant; and Ms. June Kimmel, from the League of Women Voters, who questioned the use of “$30 million to bring illness and waste disposal problems of $100 million.” The hearing was held to allow for citizen input and debate on the industry, something that NCOSH felt was missing when the General Assembly passed the $24 million-dollar legislation that included the Microelectronic Research Center. In summarizing the gathering, NCOSH had felt “the hearing’s message successfully reached the general public but ha[d] done little to move state officials to implement changes …”

These efforts were consolidated in January 1982 as NCOSH received a $34,000 grant from the MRBF to conduct a thorough examination of the health and safety of the microelectronic industry, particularly focusing on how it would affect North Carolina workers

113 Dub Gulley, interview by Derrick Kay, August 8, 2017.
long-term. NCOSH modeled its project around an “industry desirability index,” which was
designed by Chip Hughes and published in “Targeting “Desirable” Industries.” Although most
studies had focused on economic effects of industry, Hughes challenged the Department of
Commerce to examine the impacts on the environment and worker health, presenting a holistic
framework for evaluating recruiting efforts. Applying his model to industries from 1977 to 1980,
he found “a large percentage of jobs were in companies with high illnesses and injury severity
rates and with heavy volumes of toxic waste generation,” meaning that current industrial
recruitment efforts did not account for the health and safety of workers in North Carolina.115

In April 1982, NCOSH hired Tobi Lippin to work on this newly funded industrial
recruitment project. Before joining NCOSH, Lippin had previously directed a project for the
American Friends Service Committee, which sought to empower women workers, particularly
those in service or factory jobs. She planned and lead workshops on a wide variety of topics,
including job safety and health, harassment, collective action in the workplace, and
discrimination. This experience made her an asset for NCOSH, bringing with her a labor
background, educational experience, and a focus on women in the workforce.

Lippin’s hiring created reverberations around NCOSH, forcing the organization to begin
to acknowledge latent gender issues. In the spring and summer of 1982, the community outreach
group of NCOSH, which was primarily composed of women volunteers, began meeting and
sharing their concerns that NCOSH was “not doing much outreach to women workers – a large

115 Joseph T. Hughes, Jr., “Targeting “Desirable” Industries: Gauging Recruitment of Industry by what’s good for the
economy, for the environment, and for workers,” N.C. Insight, May 1982 in Box 25, Folder 854 in NCOSH, SHC.;
“Industrial Recruitment,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, January 1982 in Box 9, Folder 320 in NCOSH, SHC.
segment of the unorganized workforce.” As the group continued to meet, they also shared stories of sexism within their work at NCOSH. Although no specific examples were provided in the newsletter write-up about the group, the women felt that some of the sexism had been “overt, some indirect, most certainly not intended to hurt or be derogatory. Yet still present.” Gulley remembered these issues popping up particularly among the union members and the female health professionals and staff, problems arising with sexist behaviors or comments from the male members.116 The women decided to bring sexism up during a health and technical committee meeting, challenging the organization to change and orient its focus toward women. Ultimately, the group questioned how they all could organize for social change if they themselves could not openly confront and deal with issues of sexism, racism, or discrimination.117 These conversations represented an important development, internally, within the group; however, NCOSH remained largely tied to organized, male labor, a thread that will be examined and discussed further in the following chapter.

In addition to the hiring of Lippin, the public awareness campaign around industrial recruitment received further support when NCOSH secured an additional $30,000 grant, in November 1982, from the MBRF to conduct three unique projects focusing on industrial recruitment, employee right-to-know, and worker’s compensation issues. The grant, which NCOSH entitled “Industrial Recruiting: Occupational & Environmental Health Impacts and a Citizen Response for Change in North Carolina,” sought to tie three seemingly disparate threads together. The project would study how industrial recruiters claim to promote cooperation

116 Dub Gulley, interview by Derrick Kay, August 8, 2017.
117 “Reaching in, Reaching Out,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, July 1982, 7-8 in Box 9, Folder 323 in NCOSH, SHC.
between workers, communities, and industries, but often ignore all but the concerns of industry creating lingering issues of chemical exposure and inadequate compensation systems. Ultimately NCOSH hoped to “educate and empower N.C. workers and community groups to influence 3 key public policy areas which negatively affect the health of N.C. workers and communities.”

Although NCOSH had requested over $70,000 for the joint programs, the MBRF awarded only a little under half of that amount, forcing NCOSH to narrow the focus over time, moving from a broad critique of development toward the specific right-to-know issue.

The following month, NCOSH used some of the funding to print an informational packet on microelectronics in the workplace. The guide, entitled “Microelectronics: Safety and Health in the Workplace,” included an overview of NCOSH and a brief explanation of hazards in the electronic industry. The bundle included facts on chemicals, semiconductor manufacturing and soldering, workers’ rights, and how to speak to a doctor about chemical exposure symptoms or issues. Lippin and a member of the NCOSH Community Outreach Committee developed the informational brochure, using it to hold a health and safety class for thirty students at Durham Technical Institute, all of whom were preparing to enter the semi-conductor industry, and for widespread distribution to NCOSH member locals.

NCOSH further broadened their educational campaign, producing a video entitled “Paychecks and Promises,” through a collaboration with North State Public Video (NSPV), an

118 “Industrial Recruiting: Occupational & Environmental Health Impacts and a Citizen Response for Change in North Carolina,” in Box 25, Folder 854 in NCOSH, SHC.
119 “November 30, 1982,” in Box 25, Folder 854 in NCOSH, SHC.
120 “Microelectronics: Safety and Health in the Workplace,” in Box 12, Folder 465 in NCOSH, SHC.
121 “Safety and Health in the Workplace: Microelectronics,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, December 1982 in Box 9, Folder 325 in NCOSH, SHC.
educational and video documentary company. The effort, which was guided by Lippin, sought to raise questions that were typically left out of business oriented and state directed plans for development, asking “what kind of jobs, how is the public quality of life affected, and what is the cost in public dollars for recruitment incentives.” The thirty-two-minute video featured a contextualization of the development strategies utilized in North Carolina, initially laying out an argument that the state presents an excellent model for studying the selling approach toward recruitment. This approach included “thinly veiled references to low unionization,” and a workforce “portrayed as productive, docile, and in some cases, infinitely replaceable.” North Carolina did not value the worker or the community, instead they sold the images of North Carolina as one of low wages, little union activity, and a ready and willing workforce. To examine these claims, the video then presented data, interviews, and footage that highlighted prevailing low wages across industries, low unionization and hostile union policies, retaliatory plant closings, and the overall conflict between the interests of industry and that of the community. Focusing primarily on the microelectronic industry, the video interlaced case studies of commercial fishing and the coastal peat industry.

Among those interviewed were workers from the Durham Technology Production Line Company, or Cabletronics, that closed after the workers voted for unionization within the plant. These interviews resonated well with other stories, such as that of Ernest McDougald, who worked for Mueller Steam Specialty Company in Lumberton, North Carolina. In the early 1970s, the company moved to North Carolina because of unionization efforts in their Brooklyn, New

122 “Application Form (Continued) Page 2,” Folder 735 in NCOSH, SHC.
York plant. The video concluded with a challenge, highlighting that public awareness efforts might be able to challenge government officials to balance out the considerations of the people and industry, stating:

“Dynamics of economic growth are complicated, there are no easy solutions or any one right answer. Local citizens need safe jobs at a decent wage. Communities want industries that offer a stable future without the threat of environmental damage. Government officials endeavor to increase their tax base. And industries themselves seek the maximization of profits. As we have seen, the balance weighs heavily in favor of government and business interests … special considerations underwritten by citizens and workers … in some places in North Carolina, the tide is turning.”

Thus, individuals need to be educated and aware of these policies, challenging the growth models and doing what is best for the community and all of those involved. Although NCOSH did not prescribe an ideal development policy, primarily because of differences in geography and community needs, they championed a model that included input from individuals and workers who lived in the areas affected by industrial recruitment.123

“Paychecks and Promises” received most of its funding from the MRBF grant, but it also received minor sponsorship contributions from the Southeast Women’s Employment Coalition, East Carolina Legal Services, Ministry for Peace and Justice Catholic Diocese, TNCOSH, and the Center for Community Self Help and Twin Streams, a reflection of Lippin’s efforts to connect the project with larger concerns of the community. The video itself was designed to be a resource, allowing for groups to understand and discuss the state’s economic policy and the impact that it had on communities and workers. The year after the video was completed, NCOSH developed a discussion guide, to go along with rentals or purchases, which would lead groups

123 "Paychecks and Promises": Tape 1, Videotape VT-04578/6 in NCOSH, SHC.
toward having meaningful conversations and more in-depth information about the economic
development policies. The video reflected and enhanced NCOSH’s overall goal of trying to
engage and publicize the shortcomings of economic policy, highlighting the side effects that
were often excluded from state projections and incentive plans.

The exposure created through the industrial recruitment awareness campaign allowed
NCOSH to become a “known commodity” to organized labor in North Carolina, their research
and advocacy efforts reinforcing their organizational consolidation and their engagement with
workers and union locals throughout the state. Union membership in NCOSH climbed
throughout the early 1980s, reaching nearly forty locals by 1983. Yet as NCOSH continued to
grow throughout the middle part of the decade, local events, such as an explosion at the
Armageddon plant in Durham, and the limited funds provided initially by the MRBF, forced the
group to focus primarily on the local right-to-know issue over the broader topic of economic
development policies.

Local Right-to-Know

One evening, in March 1983, a white cloud appeared over a white and black working-
class neighborhood in Durham, North Carolina, the fumes forcing residents to evacuate their
homes as officials determined the exact cause. A drum of butyl acetate, an industrial solvent,
erupted inside the Armageddon Recycling Company plant, a location that treated and stored

124 “Paychecks and Promises: The Impacts of Economic Development Discussion Guide,” in Folder 464 in NCOSH, SHC.
125 Dub Gulley, interview by Derrick Kay, August 8, 2017.
126 “Application Form (Continued) Page 2,” in Folder 735 in NCOSH, SHC.
127 “October 14, 1983,” in Box 25, 854 in NCOSH, SHC.
hundreds of different toxic chemicals and substances. While investigating the eruption and helping to remove the compromised barrels, two police officers were overcome by the fumes, and hospitalized due to their exposure and lack of safety equipment. This event led to the creation of the Citizens for a Safer East Durham (CSED), an ally in NCOSH’s growing movement for the enactment of right-to-know ordinances and legislation on the local and state levels.128

In 1982, NCOSH submitted a funding proposal to the ZSRF that sought to create “heightened public awareness of, and greater participation in,” dialogues around an individual’s right-to-know what toxic substances were in their local environment, especially among workers, health care providers, and consumers. The ZSRF rejected the proposal, questioning whether NCOSH could be a strong enough vehicle to create these conversations and enact sweeping changes. The funding committee encouraged NCOSH to reach out to other groups and form coalitions, strengthening the depth of their proposal while also placing emphasis on a community effort over an organizational effort. The advice dovetailed well into the Durham community, where right-to-know issues had been popping up well before the Armageddon episode. Ultimately, NCOSH re-applied and received funding in 1983, reflecting a successful integration of their ideas and the issue into the community at-large.129

In the aftermath of the explosion, community outrage forced Durham political leaders to outline a plan for determining what substances were being used, stored, and treated throughout

129 Box 27, Folder 1041 in NCOSH, SHC.
the city. Initially, the city council appointed a pro-business advisory committee to draft an ordinance that would require the labeling of local chemicals and toxic substances. NCOSH and the CSED, which had grown into the Durham Toxic Coalition, continued to push the issue in the 1983 city-council elections, running and supporting candidates who would pursue stricter policies toward labeling chemical substances. After the election, which saw a slew of pro-right-to-know candidates take office, the citizen advisory board was broadened, this time including representatives from “labor unions, the east Durham community, consumer and public-health organizations, NCOSH, and local industries.” This new group drafted a revised ordinance, held public sessions for input, and continued to grow communal support for stricter labeling practices.¹³⁰

The business community challenged these developments, centering their concerns on issues of trade secret exposure and the inability to attract new businesses who might not want to comply with the new local standards. Jeffrey Downin, a member of the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce, felt that any ordinance would be “a liability if it results in Durham being perceived as a community which gives little credence to the legitimate concerns of responsible industry.” Eventually the two sides compromised, a move that would allow citizens, workers, and emergency responders access to chemical data while also allowing the companies to protect trade secrets. The ordinance passed in May of 1985, making Durham the first municipality in the South to adopt such a law. Durham was not alone either, right-to-know dialogue spread into other parts of North Carolina, including Roanoke Rapids, Asheville, Fayetteville, Charlotte, and other communities.

¹³⁰ Dee Reid, “Armageddon in North Carolina,” Technology Review, August/September 1986 in Box 13, Folder 498 in NCOSH, SHC.
Winston-Salem.\textsuperscript{131} The groundswell of support would push the General Assembly to also act, keeping some aspects of the local ordinances but also preventing local governments from erecting more stringent practices than dictated by North Carolina law. For Austin and NCOSH, the passing of a state regulation still represented a victory, for “it was the pressure from our local ordinance that gave the state law a chance.”\textsuperscript{132}

The early right-to-know efforts had been funded by the MBRF so in 1984, NCOSH submitted a draft proposal to the foundation, asking for a third year of organizational support around issues of economic development. In a letter back to NCOSH, Assistant Director George Penick challenged the group to “strike a balance between the reality of what you need and the ideal of what a foundation looks for: concentrate on a particular aspect of the program, probably Right-To-Know, and describe how the effort this year will build on the efforts of the previous two years.”\textsuperscript{133} Even after considering this feedback and revising their proposal, the MBRF still rejected the request in October, leaving NCOSH reliant on money from the ZSRF for their right-to-know campaign during that funding cycle.

The patchwork of funding limited NCOSH’s ability to maintain staff and continue its services among a growing body of labor membership. By NCOSH’s tenth anniversary, in 1986, the organization had grown to include sixty-five union locals, representing 23,000 workers, and over 400 individual supporters. The sporadic funding thus presented a challenge to the growing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} “A Southern First: Citizens Push for Right-to-Know Law,” \textit{The People’s Voice} and “Ordinance proposed to provide data on hazardous substances,” \textit{Daily Herald} in Box 13, Unfiled in NCOSH, SHC.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{133} “August 8, 1984,” in Box 25, Folder 853 in NCOSH, SHC.
\end{itemize}
apparatus and capacities of the group. This reality is highlighted in excerpts from the financial report given at the 1984 Annual Convention, which stated:

“Foundation Grants – a major source of funding for the past 3 years – will go down significantly as a result of our loss of Mary Reynolds Babcock funding. Currently the projected 1985 budget is at only half the 1984 budget … Retrenchment is in order, and an increased effort to raise non-foundation funds in order to achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency.”

Despite the financial uncertainties, David Austin remembered the early 1980s as a time that allowed NCOSH to “inch our way towards the model that we aspired to and had some success doing it …” The acquisition of independent funding and the increasing interactions with labor had allowed the group to develop outside of being the technical wing of the BLA, it had gone in a very different direction and started to realize the ideal of following the COSH model.

Realizing the necessity of sustained funding for their overall growth and success, NCOSH received grants, in the mid-1980s, from the MBRF and ZSRF for fundraising and self-sufficiency efforts. In 1982, grants represented 81 percent of the funds available for NCOSH, a number that slowly decreased throughout the decade as NCOSH diversified its funding pool, relying on member contributions, fundraising efforts, and later, fee based trainings. The self-sufficiency plans centered on the ability to engage with and tap into the dedication of staff, membership, and board members. The growth of the membership stretched NCOSH but it also provided an ample source of funding and energy for the group. Dues were collected on a per capita basis, at a rate of five cents per member per month, with a minimum of $45 and a

134 “The Not So Good News,” *NCOSH Safety and Health News*, March 1985 in Box 9, Folder 335 in NCOSH, SHC.
135 David Austin, interview by Derrick Kay, August 23, 2017.
136 “Moving Toward Self-Sufficiency,” in Box 27, Folder 1042 in NCOSH, SHC.
maximum of $600 per year. In speaking of this critical period, Lippin recalled the energy and vigor in which union members participated in NCOSH raffle efforts. Recalling one specific individual, Bobby Lane a machinist from Cherry Point, Lippin remembered that he would always purchase a ticket for every member of his local. The newsletters from the period also reflect member involvement, advertising raffle efforts and then proudly displaying the winners and which union locals they represented. The enlargement of NCOSH over time allowed the group to collect more dues, engage in better fundraising efforts, and begin to charge fees for certain services, such as HAZMAT training. As the decade continued, NCOSH supplemented its unstable foundation grant funding with revenue from these other sources, allowing the group to continue to grow its organizational and educational capacities.

**Repetitive Motion Injuries**

As NCOSH established its funding bases and found success with its overarching right-to-know campaign, it was confronted with the growing issue of repetitive motion injuries, an increasingly visible problem during the second half of the 1980s. This growth in injuries can be attributed in large part to the proliferation of automated systems in plants, forcing workers to do the same single motions every day instead of a variety of different tasks. Automation encompassed assembly lines, computer oriented workplaces, and meat packing and processing plants. In North Carolina, the Department of Labor reported an illness rate of 19.8 percent, in 1986, for repetitive motion injuries, a figure that nearly doubled, to 32.4 percent in 1987.

137 “NCOSH Membership News Update,” in Folder 13 in NCOSH, SHC.
138 Tobi Lippin, interview by Derrick Kay, October 11, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
Similarly, between 1982 and 1986, the number of individuals compensated, through the worker’s compensation system, for repetitive injuries increased by more than 346 percent.\textsuperscript{140} This trend worried NCOSH, focusing their efforts on awareness and mitigation leading into the 1990s.

Repetitive motion concerns were not a wholly new phenomenon for NCOSH or the workers of North Carolina. In February 1981, NCOSH sponsored a health screening clinic for the Greensboro local of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). The screening had a dual purpose, first to educate workers about the presence of asbestos as insulation in their work environment, and second, to investigate the newly identified problem of stress among the Letter Sorting Machine (LSM) operators. Although the machines had been in use for a few years prior, the local had noticed an uptick in complaints around production rates, noise levels, and rising incidents of carpal tunnel syndrome, all difficulties that slowed production and led toward increased stress loads on the workers.\textsuperscript{141} During the clinic, NCOSH found that 72 percent of the machine operators interviewed felt the work rate was too fast. The relationship between NCOSH and the APWU continued to grow over the course of the decade, with the local joining NCOSH formally in 1982. The groups continued to hold educational and screening workshops throughout the 1980s, evolving from issues of stress to concerns about repetitive motion in the workplace.

The issues of repetitive motion and carpal tunnel syndrome were also prevalent in other industries, especially in meat processing. The poultry industry grew tremendously in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, with annual consumption of all poultry products growing from

\textsuperscript{140} “OSHA/Repetitive Motion Injury-HB 1208,” in Folder 618 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{141} “Postal Workers – Zip Code Blues,” \textit{NCOSH Safety and Health News}, June 1981 in Box 9, Folder 317 in NCOSH, SHC.
19 percent of all meat consumed in 1975 to 31 percent in 1991. During that period, the industry also saw an increase of employment from 81,000 to 159,000 jobs with a simultaneous consolidation of the industry, the number of plants decreasing from 562 in 1975 to 460 in 1989. The industry was primarily located in rural environments, with two-thirds of all workers living in nonmetropolitan areas and nearly half of all processing plants operating in nonmetropolitan landscapes. These areas were notable because of their lower rate wages, less unionized workforces, and their supply of unskilled and easily accessible labor. On Case Farms, in Morganton, North Carolina, the workforce was predominantly white until the late 1960s, it became increasing black into the late 1980s, and then saw an infusion of Latino labor in the 1990s, a trend mirrored throughout North Carolina and the rest of the South.\textsuperscript{142} In 1990, wages for poultry workers remained considerably below that of other individuals engaged in manufacturing industries.\textsuperscript{143}

The poultry industry found fertile ground in North Carolina, a state which saw production grow from 1.1 billion pounds produced in 1970 to 3.1 billion pounds by 1990, including over 98 percent of that being processed within the state. The consolidation of processing plants throughout the 1980s led toward a concentration of these industries in the South, with nearly half of all processing plants being in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, or North Carolina by the end of the 1990s. Following national and regional trends, North Carolina plants tended to operate in rural areas, taking advantage of state incentives and historical low-wage and anti-union

sentiments. In *We Just Keep Running the Line*, historian LaGuana Gray argues that poultry “workforces are constructed, built to satisfy the needs of an industry that relies heavily on a large supply of cheap, unskilled workers in dire need of jobs.” In her study, black women take center stage, illustrating the economic and racial dynamics that framed poultry work in the rural South, particularly in Arkansas. Given the poultry industry’s reliance on low wages and an easily accessible unskilled labor force, North Carolina also allowed the industry to tap into a workforce that would offer little resistance and live in constant need of the meager wages provided within a chicken plant.

NCOSH slowly began to recognize these historical and present-day inequalities, particularly following the hiring of Lippin and the gender focused orientation of the outreach committee. Between 1983 and 1985, NCOSH conducted a participatory research study that involved over 1,000 telephone officer workers from seven different member locals. Following up on the survey’s findings, in early summer of 1985, NCOSH developed a programming series titled “Women’s Jobs, Women’s Health,” which sought to “empower women workers to address their workplace health and safety problems.” Nearly 55 percent of all workers in North Carolina were women, according to NCOSH, a figure that was 12 percentage points higher than the national average and reflected the necessity for a second family income since wages were so low for all workers in the state. Furthermore “most of the state’s women are employed in low paying,

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repetitive and increasingly automated jobs,” which often included newly identified health problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome and occupational stress.

NCOSH’s “Women’s Jobs, Women’s Health” programs would be held throughout the state, involve local planning committees of women, and identify leaders and other participants who would make these programs a success. In discussing the occupational hazards, NCOSH relied on data and findings from women involved with the APWU and CWA, groups that were members of NCOSH. In alleviating issues of low-pay, discrimination, and lack of hazard education, NCOSH felt it could empower women through a focus on “skills training, group building and leadership development,” that would allow the workers to “more effectively” organize around health and safety improvements. This information was included in a grant proposal; however, it is unclear, from the archival records, if NCOSH received funding and implemented the program in its entirety.146

Although the inclusion of gender into NCOSH’s work plans allowed for a broader inclusion of workers, Lippin remembered being hampered by the low unionization rates in North Carolina, a limitation and awareness that NCOSH could “help people only so much.” Other groups, like Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) and Southerner’s for Economic Justice (SEJ), were heavily involved in the grassroots organizing of women and people of color, particularly in and around the poultry industry. But NCOSH, and organized labor throughout the state, was “pretty white,” realities that were reflected in the leadership and staff of NCOSH and organized labor groups. Although some unions did have African Americans in leadership roles and more

146 “May 1985,” in Box 27, Folder 1034 in NCOSH, SHC.
minority participation, such as in the APWU and CWA, these clusters tended to not be the norm and often reflected job and labor divisions. For example, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) tended to have more minority members, a product of the concentration of blacks in the meat processing industry at that time.147

In looking to address issues of repetitive motion, NCOSH applied for and received funding from the MRBF for a two-year project to bring awareness, influence policy, and reduce the rate of repetitive motion injuries (RMI) in the state. NCOSH submitted stories to newspapers in Raleigh, Durham, Charlotte, Asheville, Greensboro, and Winston Salem, which included statistics and the personal accounts of RMI sufferers that they had interviewed, trying to raise awareness about the condition and what NCOSH was doing to combat its prevalence in the workplace. They also met with N.C. OSHA officials, educating them about RMI issues. The N.C. OSHA staff had received little to no training on repetitive motion injuries and did not have an ergonomist on staff until 1989. NCOSH also held training workshops, including one for the AWPU at their statewide convention and partnered with the Center for Women’s Economic Alternatives (CWEA), a group out of Ahoskie, North Carolina that primarily worked with Perdue workers in Robersonville and Bertie County, to conduct a screening clinic for poultry workers in eastern North Carolina.148

NCOSH also launched a Repetitive Motion Injury Project, in August 1988, an effort spearheaded by Steve Edelstein, a board member and worker’s compensation lawyer in Raleigh. Edelstein had worked with CWEA on a case in 1987, representing a Perdue worker, Linda

147 Tobi Lippin, interview by Derrick Kay, October 11, 2017.
148 “NCOSH Interim Report: Repetitive Motion Injury in North Carolina,” in Box 25, Folder 852 in NCOSH, SHC.
Buckholts, who was fired after having surgery and returning to work at the plant in Robersonville. Edelstein helped file a lawsuit against her dismissal, an important step, because it “challenge[d] the poultry industry’s long-standing practice of getting rid of workers who get sick or injured on their jobs, particularly those who develop Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.” The RMI project was an educational campaign, seeking to provide OSHA with a better understanding of the issue and possible solutions, while also engaging with workers and health professionals about the condition itself. NCOSH gathered testimony from workers in the textile, poultry, and postal industries, allowing the group to humanize those injured and illustrate the toll that injuries took on workers and the community. Although the project sought to ensure fair and adequate compensation, Edelstein remembered that another focus was on prevention, stopping problems before they occurred and avoiding the necessity of compensation after the fact.149

At the same time, NCOSH received funding from the ZSRF for a separate two-year project that would examine the role and effectiveness of N.C. OSHA, with repetitive motion injuries being a major point of emphasis and contention. A year into the project, December 1988, NCOSH released a report “North Carolina OSHA In Violation,” which concluded “The N.C. OSHA program needs improvements. Until necessary changes are made, both in the statues and in the administration of the program, North Carolina workers are at risk on their jobs.” Since North Carolina had a low unionization rate and thus very few contractual protections, N.C. OSHA offered the only possibility for safe workplaces; however, the program remained mired in voluntary compliance practices and tied to the business interests of the state. For a growing issue

149 Steve Edelstein, interview with Derrick Kay, August 9, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author; Folder 1526 in NCOSH, SHC.
like RMI, NCOSH uncovered a rise in cases reported between 1982 and 1986, from 145 out of 1,886 or 7.7 percent of illnesses being RMI related to 480 out of 2,429 or 19.8 percent. This was a worrying trend, one that was buttressed by the fact that N.C. OSHA had never issued a citation against an employer for RMI issues. After the release of the report, NCOSH looked to enact an action plan, moving away from the initial research and toward bringing these policy issues to the public. NCOSH pushed the legislature for appropriations tied to ergonomic training at the Department of Labor, and continued to conduct workshops on the issues to educate workers.  

The scrutiny around motion related injuries received a boost when Perdue was fined nearly $40,000 by N.C. OSHA during the fall of 1989, levying penalties of $15,690 for their Lewiston plant and $24,000 for their Robersonville plant. The fines represented the conclusion of a six-month investigation, which N.C. OSHA stated was in response to “recent attention focused on the situation,” a sign that NCOSH interpreted as a response to their RMI Project and a growing awareness of issues in this industry and these plants. This development was coupled with increased talk within the General Assembly about workplace matters in North Carolina, largely sparked by the growing awareness around repetitive motion injuries and the Perdue fines. The debates in the legislature included a bill to increase OSHA penalties, a bill to increase funding for staff in enforcement positions, and an RMI bill aimed at reducing the number of workers affected in North Carolina. These measures received a lot of attention from pro-business politicians and industry officials, many arguing that worker negligence played a role in

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150 “North Carolina OSHA In Violation,” in Folder 1084 in NCOSH, SHC.
151 “N.C. OSHA Inspects Perdue for RMI Problems,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, April/May-January/July 1989 in Box 9, Folder 353 in NCOSH, SHC.
workplace hazards, and that punishing industry would have negative long-term effects on the economy and North Carolina’s ability to recruit new industries. Although the only bill to eventually pass was the penalty increase, NCOSH still felt that their voices and that of the workers had been heard, and that their involvement in RMI issues had been a “contributing factor in N.C. OSHA finally taking the RMI problem more seriously.” NCOSH’s growth throughout the 1980s and their involvement in issues, such as economic development, right-to-know, and repetitive motion injuries, allowed the organization to challenge and influence policy debates, marking their transformation into one of the leading occupational safety and health groups in the state.

Conclusion

NCOSH began the 1980s on the periphery of the labor movement in North Carolina, largely offering technical assistance and volunteers for the Brown Lung screening clinics. However, funding, first through the NSF and New Directions programs, then through the MRBF and ZSRF, allowed NCOSH to develop its organizational structures and engage in economic development, right-to-know, and repetitive motion campaigns throughout the state. This period witnessed the growth of the COSH focus, incorporating larger numbers of organized labor and health professionals into board, membership, and committee roles. By the end of the decade, NCOSH featured membership from over seventy union locals. The broad campaigns sought to empower and assist workers, unorganized and organized, but the group found its largest support and greatest voice among the union locals spread throughout the state. NCOSH’s expansion

152 NCOSH Safety and Health News, April/May-January/July 1989 in Box 9, Folder 353 in NCOSH, SHC.
throughout the 1980s allowed it to become a leading occupational safety and health group in North Carolina, an important development as the North Carolina economy continued to change and labor confronted new, and tragic, workplace issues throughout the 1990s.
CHAPTER III: The Hamlet Response Coalition and Political Agenda of Change

At approximately 8:15 a.m., the morning of September 3, 1991, the first shift at Imperial Food Products in rural Hamlet, North Carolina, had just started when screams of “fire” and clouds of smoke began to envelope the nearly 100 workers at the plant. The rapid spread of heavy smoke and flame throughout the chicken processing facility overwhelmed line workers as they struggled with locked doors that management had ordered closed. Ultimately, twenty-five individuals would die on the job that day and another fifty-four workers would sustain injuries. For years afterward, those left behind would wonder how a tragedy like this could happen.

One of those survivors, Mary Bryant, recalled feeling that management “didn’t care anything about how you felt, who you were or what was the reason. All they wanted was for you to run the chicken.” Bryant fulfilled many different roles while working at the plant, operating processing machinery, weighing out chicken parts, and doing anything that Imperial asked of her, all while enduring frigid temperatures and a constant dampness that came from dealing with partially frozen chicken pieces. She worked every day for long hours out of fear that one break or bathroom visit that lasted too long would ensure a write up; accumulating five resulted in certain termination. Although the job made Bryant miserable, she remained out of necessity, “working there was one thing that I did only because I needed a job. It wasn’t something that I wanted to do but at the time it was the only job available.” Viewing the tragedy of September 1991 as a

result of greed, Bryant hoped that others would never have to endure the same conditions she and her coworkers experienced at Imperial, praying “to God that it will never happen again.”

Mary Bryant’s testimony represents one piece of evidence gathered by the Hamlet Response Coalition (HRC) in the months and years after the fire at Imperial Foods. Along with others, it provided material for the movement to advocate for workplace safety and health changes throughout North Carolina and the United States. The HRC, formed in the aftermath of the tragedy, consisted of a wide range of progressive grassroots organizations, including labor, social justice, religious, environmental, health, and women’s organizations. These different groups sought to reform occupational safety procedures within the state through legislative lobbying, public awareness campaigns, and direct action including picketing outside offending industries.

The fire in Hamlet confirmed the necessity for industrial reforms, as championed by the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project (NCOSH) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The HRC developed into an overtly political coalition that expanded the foundations of reform laid by NCOSH and organized labor. The NCOSH office building housed the HRC, and NCOSH operated as one of its founding steering committee members; but these two groups did not always share the same areas of concern nor did they always pursue reform using identical strategies and tactics. An exploration of the creation and practices of the HRC, embedded within the larger narrative of NCOSH, illustrates the limitations and difficulties with coalition building.

154 “Hamlet Testimonies,” Folder 1152 in the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project Records #4578, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [Archive hereafter cited as SHC; collection hereafter cited as NCOSH].
occupational reform, and creating long lasting, meaningful changes within an antagonistic political and economic climate. The HRC helped enact many workplace reforms, including whistleblower protections, OSHA fines for state and local agencies, and company-based safety and health programs or committees; however, those measures did not last. Reforms faltered over time as repeated challenges by pro-business politicians dismantled them in the years following the 1992 legislative session. As the memory of the Hamlet trauma and the reasons for the tragedy faded, the HRC lost momentum, leaving NCOSH as the remaining standard-bearer for occupational safety and health in North Carolina by the mid-1990s.

The shift in momentum also came during a transitional time in North Carolina’s economy, a time when immigrants began to supplant the traditional low wage, often black, labor base that had sustained industrial growth in the post-World War II era. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population of North Carolina rose from 76,726 to 378,963, a growth rate of 394%. This rate represented the fastest growing Latino population in the United States in the decade. Latino workers found jobs throughout the state; however, these jobs tended to be concentrated in lower paid and less skilled fields, particularly in farming, construction, and transportation.  

Accordingly, the HRC broadened NCOSH’s vision in the early 1990s, a change that continued throughout its campaigns in the latter half of the decade. The Imperial tragedy exposed the limitations of a workplace safety movement built around connections with a small organized labor movement, a traditionally white endeavor. The unorganized black women of Hamlet had faced tremendous hardships and horrid conditions but they had never heard about OSHA, how to


155 NC Latino Health, 2003 (Durham, NC: North Carolina Institute of Medicine, February 2003), 7-10.
file a claim, or how to request an inspection. The fire brought attention to these silences in the labor movement, broadening the COSH model to incorporate religious, environmental, and other community oriented groups. This expansion allowed NCOSH to move toward a vision of workplace safety that would be more inclusive of all of those who labored in North Carolina. Tom O’Connor, Executive Director of NCOSH from 1994 until the early 2000s, remembered that NCOSH never fully shifted away from organized labor, but instead developed a comprehensive programming model that included educational outreach and organizing within different segments of North Carolina’s workforce.¹⁵⁶

The Hamlet Response Coalition offered a politically focused, broad ranged agenda that sought to reform North Carolina’s occupational safety and health practices by adopting a legislative and direct confrontation agenda. These practices built upon those already employed by NCOSH, allowing the groups to advance their goals and complement the work of each other. Furthermore, the HRC represented a broadening of the COSH model, stretching its occupational reform beyond organized labor and health professionals through an incorporation of a wide variety of community groups and laboring interests, including youth and Latino workers.

The Founding of the HRC

On September 11, 1991, eight days after the fire, Hamlet’s local newspaper, the News-Messenger, ran an editorial entitled “Coverage May Help,” which highlighted the role the media played in framing the fire and its aftermath while also challenging the state to address worker safety. The editorial begins with the grief felt during the burial and mourning of the twenty-five

¹⁵⁶ Tom O’ Connor, interview by Derrick Kay, July 27, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
dead workers, illustrating how the coverage of the tragedy and the emotions behind it played out on the local and national media stages. Although the reporting had scrutinized all aspects of the fire and covered the heightened grief and anger of the small community, the story of Hamlet, if used as a proper catalyst, could “prove beneficial in the long run.” The tragedy represented more than the grief could show. The fire had not happened in isolation but occurred because of “prior neglect of conditions at the plant and of worker safety, in general, in this state [North Carolina].” Citing a statistic that the North Carolina Department of Labor employed only sixteen inspectors, a number well shy of the 114 required by federal guidelines, the editorialist framed the tragedy as one of greed, the state’s hunger to lure industries at any cost. In the closing lines, the author hoped that media coverage would “make it impossible for state officials and the legislature to ignore worker safety,” and that any steps toward future prevention might, over time, make “the lives lost here … not seem quite so uselessly wasted.”

This editorial framed one of the key questions surrounding labor and other like-minded progressive organizations in the months after the Hamlet fire: how can a moment of tragedy mobilize efforts to spur challenges and reforms to the overarching economic and political system? Numerous groups, working in the form of coalitions, sought to answer this question in a myriad of different ways. One group, Citizens Against Repulsive Environments (CARE), saw the fire as an opportunity to challenge the southern labor system, bringing together a wide array of national organizations. Another organization, the focus of this chapter, the Hamlet Response Coalition for Workplace Reform (HRC), constructed a state level legislative response that sought

157 “Coverage May Help,” (Hamlet, NC), September 11, 1991, Folder 1593 in NCOSH, SHC.
to use the tragedy to solidify changes to workplace safety in North Carolina. These groups, with complementary yet competing visions, both recognized an opportunity for workplace improvements in the aftermath of the fire; a small window of potential action that could turn lost lives into meaningful reforms.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire a variety of groups, including the NAACP, the National Rainbow Coalition, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), the Organization of Former Imperial Food Project Workers, and the Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ), coalesced to form the Citizens Against Repulsive Environments (CARE) coalition. Relying on the network of the BWFJ, a group dedicated to organizing and empowering African American workers throughout the South, CARE began holding weekly meetings with former Imperial workers and their families at the town hall in Dobbin Heights.\textsuperscript{158} Dobbin Heights, an African American community, was an unincorporated municipality in Richmond County, adjacent to Hamlet, where many of the workers involved in the Hamlet fire lived.\textsuperscript{159} These meetings organized local citizen participation in what the coalition hoped would become a larger mobilization of individuals and groups against low wages and racism within the southern workplace.

On October 7, 1991, twenty-two individuals from eighteen different local organizations met at the Episcopal Diocese in Raleigh to coordinate and exchange information about Hamlet.

\textsuperscript{158} “Hamlet Coordination Meeting, Friday, November 15, 1991,” Folder 1291 in NCOSH, SHC.
Organizers came from a variety of different progressive groups in North Carolina, including representatives from NCOSH, BWFJ, Southerner’s for Economic Justice (SEJ), Clean Water Fund (CWF), NC Equity, various union locals, and residents from Hamlet. This Hamlet Response Coordination meeting, a precursor to the HRC, set up committees that would begin to explore issues related to the tragic fire. The committees formed targeted investigation hearings, the state legislative agenda, health and safety in the poultry industry, and a national mobilization effort. The group also set up action items, using their collective understandings of the situation of labor in North Carolina to figure out the best course for the budding coalition to take. Regarding the governmental response to the fire, the group decided that it might be best to build a statewide coalitional campaign that would advocate for N.C. OSHA reform, pressuring legislative leadership to support protections for workers.

The group also decided to organize a taskforce to monitor any investigative or political hearings, and to develop a speaker’s bureau that would involve Hamlet workers and allow them to speak about the incident and conditions in the plant. Many of the groups saw the budding coalition as an opportunity for organizing and additional safety training; NCOSH offered to hold seminars or workshops, on occupational hazards and OSHA, in Hamlet or other areas that might prove crucial to future unionization efforts, hoping to prepare workers with the knowledge and organization skills needed to unionize their workplaces. Finally, the groups settled on their media approach, deciding to work with Hamlet citizens and journalists to provide comprehensive coverage, but also assuring the workers in Hamlet that the group would continue to involve and support them even after the initial outrage faded. Some of the former workers had already began to “clam up,” with fears that talking to the media or sharing their story would lead to reprisals or limited job opportunities in Hamlet and the surrounding areas. The silencing of workers would
undercut reform efforts; therefore, they needed reassurance that their voices mattered in the fight for workplace reform. The Coordinating group set the next meeting for November 15, allowing the committees to begin to research and prepare their individual responses.160

On October 18, 1991, CARE held a Hamlet March that involved over 1,000 participants, including many locals, and a visit from the APWU President Moe Biller, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and UFCW President Bill Wynn.161 The date coincided with a previously planned visit by Reverend Jackson, which had offered the local groups very little time to plan and invite other national groups to join the rally. The rally centered on issues of occupational safety and health, an attempt to solidify support for a Congressional reform of OSHA. The success, albeit limited, of the October March sparked additional action, including a vigil at the Imperial plant on November 16 and the return of UFCW and Jackson on November 25, this time to stress Jackson’s commitment to Hamlet and workplace safety. Tying Hamlet to a long list of civil rights activism, Jackson stated, “I see the same faces here that I saw in Memphis, Tennessee, with Dr. King, just basic, humble people who want to work and get a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work. And somehow your lives have been interrupted.”162 Jackson’s return trip allowed Hamlet to stay in the public consciousness and signaled the importance of workplace issues to a national audience. In December 1991, CARE announced a national march in Hamlet on May 2, 1992, believing that “a march and rally will serve to focus continued attention of the struggle in Hamlet as well as on the struggle in the South.”163 The CARE coalition and its member

160 Folder 1908 in the Southerners for Economic Justice Records #5320, SHC. [Collection hereafter cited as SEJ]
161 “Protesting the Hamlet, NC Tragedy,” Folder 1278 in NCOSH, SHC.
163 “Care Coalition for Imperial Food Workers in the Struggle,” Folder 1279 in NCOSH, SHC.
organizations continued to follow up on these early successes and ambitions, building momentum toward the broader goal of organizing the South.

The actions of CARE allowed the Imperial workers a voice in their struggle for justice and reform, but it also exposed some of the issues and disconnections between local and national tragedies and movements. Local citizens had been involved in the planning and facilitation of the October march, but Jackson’s presence and his time constraints put locals at odds with the national organizers. The same issues resurfaced again during the Hamlet Response Coordination meeting in November. Ashaki Binta, lead organizer for the BWFJ effort in Hamlet, presented reports on the overall CARE effort and campaign. One area of concern addressed during the meeting involved the fear that outside involvement and agitation would prove “counterproductive because of resentment North Carolinians feel when outsiders get involved.”\textsuperscript{164} The presence of Reverend Jackson in Hamlet remained a contentious issue; some individuals, particularly whites, felt he stirred up racial anxiety that had not been present in the community before the fire while others felt that he drew attention away from the victims and their individual plights.\textsuperscript{165}

Viewing the necessity of forming broad coalitions in the larger localized area, Binta encouraged representatives and organizations from the Hamlet Coordinating meetings to show their support and solidarity through attendance at the weekly CARE meetings. Mark Schulz, the Executive Director of NCOSH from 1990 until 1994, knew Binta and another BWFJ organizer, Joan Sharpe, from his connections within the leftist community of North Carolina. After

\textsuperscript{164} “Hamlet Coordination Meeting, Friday, November 15, 1991,” Folder 1291 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{165} Simon, \textit{The Hamlet Fire}, 207-208.
speaking with them and attending some of the meetings in Dobbin Heights, Schulz began to see
the potential for state legislative reform in the wake of the Imperial tragedy. In his eyes, BWFJ
primarily focused on immediate support and social services, in the backdrop of the national
CARE campaign and the May rally; yet Schulz felt that local efforts, such as those of NCOSH,
could be geared toward policy changes in the North Carolina General Assembly.166

Mark Schulz came to NCOSH in January of 1990, after serving as part-time director of
the Wisconsin Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (WisCOSH). Before taking over
WisCOSH, Schultz had acted as the chair of his union’s Health and Safety Committee in
Milwaukee.167 Schultz felt that North Carolina offered an opportunity to deal with some issues of
national importance, particularly repetitive motion injury and carpal tunnel, problems he had
seen in Wisconsin but were magnified in the expansive meat and chicken processing industries
of North Carolina. He also felt dismayed by the lack of information about worker deaths, and
helped to establish a factsheet procedure that would gather and publicize worker deaths that N.C.
OSHA missed.168 His move South came at an interesting time, considering that Hamlet would
draw major attention to the issues that helped bring him to North Carolina in the first place.

Linda Mabry, a newly hired NCOSH organizer, often accompanied Schulz to the weekly
CARE meetings. Schultz hired Mabry as Organizing Coordinator in January 1992 because of her
background as President of the Charlotte Labor Council and experience of being a Board
member with NCOSH. Schultz specifically tasked Mabry with organizing an injured workers

166 Mark Schulz, interview by Derrick Kay, September 7, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
167 “NCOSH Hires Executive Director,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, Number 48/49, November and December
1989.
168 Mark Schulz, interview by Derrick Kay, September 7, 2017.
network, an idea proposed during the discussions of the HRC. NCOSH wanted Mabry to reach out and connect with injured workers or their families, including those in Hamlet, so that they could testify and “become leaders in the legislative reform movement for worker safety in North Carolina.”

Schulz and Mabry first went to the weekly Hamlet meetings to just sit in and lend support; however, their involvement slowly evolved into information and contact gathering as the injured workers network began to take shape under the direction of Mabry.

Mabry’s hiring and the new interactions with the workers in Hamlet represented a divergence from the usual organizational patterns and model that had sustained NCOSH through much of its first fifteen years of operation. Mabry became the first American African member of the NCOSH staff, an organization that had been primarily white since its inception. Additionally, the COSH model relied on relationships with organized labor, leaving NCOSH with less of an advocacy role and connection to the unorganized laborers of North Carolina. NCOSH’s involvement with different organizations and workers would expand its vision and reach, diversifying the organization in the process. These trends had begun in the late 1980s and continued throughout the rest of the decade and beyond.

In 1989, SEJ and other economic justice and community oriented groups came together to create the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network. The three founders, Leroy Johnson, Bill Troy, and Leah Wise, saw “community organizing as the way to build new community and improve livelihoods.” However, they felt that common organizing methods were quickly becoming outdated because those methods often failed to appeal and connect with women,

170 Linda Mabry, interview by Derrick Kay, September 13, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
blacks, and Latino workers; groups that were increasing becoming part of the landscape of labor in the South. These changes inspired them to create REJN as a “vehicle through which local struggles could be enhanced through mutual learning, visioning, and support.” The first REJN conference, held in Hampton, Georgia in September 1990, featured discussions and workshops on the poultry industry of North Carolina, Mississippi, and Georgia. The event focused on the idea of relationships, particularly overcoming racial differences to build meaningful organizing networks.\(^{171}\)

Although NCOSH did not join the REJN until the following year, the conversations around race, relationships and organizing continued throughout the life of the organization. Mark Schulz attended as a representative of NCOSH in September 1991, a conference heavily marked by the Imperial tragedy that had occurred two weeks before the annual meeting. The group developed a Health and Safety working group during the weekend long events, initiating many of the conversations that Leah Wise and Schultz would take back into the budding Hamlet Response Coalition.\(^{172}\) Additionally, the gathering also featured a workshop on injured workers networks, highlighting the potential and pitfalls of organizing injured laborers.\(^{173}\) This conversation outlined NCOSH’s initial framework for the injured workers network, inspiring Schultz to apply for a grant and hire Mabry in order to get the network started early in 1992. NCOSH’s involvement in the REJN, expanded through its eventual work with the HRC, opened


\(^{172}\) Ibid.

\(^{173}\) “Southeast Regional Justice Network, Gathering #2,” Box 35, Folder 1258 in NCOSH, SHC.
the organization toward newer avenues of relationship building beyond its traditional organized labor focus.

On January 30, 1992, representatives from NCOSH, N.C. Equity, the Institute of Southern Studies (ISS), Episcopal Diocese, Teamsters Local 391, CWF, Academy of Trial Lawyers, and SEJ formally created the Hamlet Response: Workplace Reform Coalition, later known as the Hamlet Response Coalition. Each group had a member on the initial Steering Committee and they all agreed to invite Binta from BWFJ to participate. The Steering Committee members helped to bring in resources, new memberships, and funding to the Coalition. Leah Wise (SEJ), Bob Hall (ISS) and Mark Schulz (NCOSH) became members of the Executive Committee. The coalition dedicated itself “to combating hazardous and abusive working conditions which result in large numbers of workers being injured or killed on the job every year in our state,” and sought to achieve this goal through raising public awareness, securing policy reform, and then monitoring the enforcement of new laws. These organizations had worked loosely together in the past but the Hamlet tragedy brought them together to fulfill a common goal and a unified mission.

The January meeting produced the initial legislative recommendations that the HRC wanted to see embodied in future workplace laws. These proposals developed a vision that placed occupational safety and health at the center of all workplace operations and relationships. Broadly speaking, the HRC wanted more employee involvement in health and safety committees as well as whistleblower and reporting protections. Employers would create and maintain active

174 “Hamlet Response Coalition for Workplace Reform,” Folder 1212 in NCOSH, SHC.
safety programs, reporting any incidents to OSHA in a specific and limited time frame. The proposal also included provisions on health hazards, a move toward eliminating occupational diseases, and placing value in the long-term health of workers. Instead of reacting solely to workplace issues, the group felt that a comprehensive response could prevent any future tragedies such as the one in Hamlet.

After the initial founding, Bob Hall, Director of ISS and member of the HRC Executive Committee, wrote two letters, one to the Partnership for Democracy and the other to the Stern Family Fund, requesting a total of $26,000 in support of a public education campaign that would build off the Hamlet tragedy. This money initially went to NCOSH, allowing the group to pay a Coordinator’s salary and maintain the financial records of the coalition. Initially informal, the agreement solidified in later years by necessity, as granting organizations questioned whether the HRC could receive money without a formal organizational tax status. Explaining the vision of the coalition, Hall stated that participants had “compiled a set of alternative policies that, if implemented, would vastly change the current imbalance between government inspectors and 160,000 workers.” Grassroots organizing and workplace solidarity represented the heart of the HRC’s proposal, providing workers with the mechanisms to have their voices heard and enact meaningful changes on the state level and on the shop floor. Simply hiring more inspectors would not change the workplace the group argued; workers needed more authority and power to improve conditions without fear of termination or retaliation. Ultimately, the money would go

toward hiring a coalition organizer and providing her with enough resources to begin implementing a better vision of workplace health and safety in North Carolina.176

Within a few weeks, the Executive Committee hired Lucinda Wykle as the HRC Coordinator. Born in Asheville, North Carolina, Wykle attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She had just returned, in June of 1991, from completing a Master’s Degree at Columbia University and working with a nonprofit called the Council on International Public Affairs, and focusing on the Bhopal gas disaster in India. After returning to North Carolina, Wykle volunteered with SEJ and an environmental group called Clean Waterfront of North Carolina, an attempt on her part to become involved with the progressive and nonprofit organizations in the North Carolina Triangle area. She remembered watching television news coverage on the day of the Imperial tragedy, “feeling angry, helpless, wanting to do something because it was just something that shouldn’t be happening … and it was in violation of so many safety practices.” In the months following the tragedy, Wykle continued to volunteer with SEJ and Clean Waterfront, allowing her to connect with Leah Wise and ultimately become the Coordinator for the HRC.177

The grants and hiring of a Coordinator allowed the HRC to expand its operation and begin the implementation of its vision of change in North Carolina. Subsequent coalition meetings, held throughout the spring of 1992, illustrate the political course of action that the HRC would adopt during the General Assembly’s short session of 1992. Since members of the

176 “February 7, 1992,” Folder 1243 in NCOSH, SHC.
177 Lucinda Wykle-Rosenberg, interview by Derrick Kay, August 16, 2017, NCOSH Project, transcript in possession of author.
legislature faced reelection in 1992, the HRC decided that its member organizations would get their volunteers and contacts to reach out to local legislators and distribute pledge cards during and after the May 2 Hamlet Rally. These cards asked the legislators to “support the Fire and Occupational Safety Commission legislation,” and “seeks its adoption without watering it down.” The cards acted as an educational tool, making politicians aware of the workplace proposals while also allowing the HRC to organize support and see which individuals they needed to focus on during the 1992 session.\textsuperscript{178} The group also set about making other educational materials, such as flyers, that would highlight the current state of workplace safety and advertise its ideas about how to improve the system.\textsuperscript{179} These strategies would allow the HRC to exert localized pressure and advertise its message of reform, setting the stage for potential changes during the legislative session of 1992.

On May 2, 1992, over 3,000 people gathered at the main door of the burnt out Imperial Foods plant as part of the Workers Memorial Day March and Rally. The procession marched three-and-a-half-miles from the plant to Richmond County Community College where different speakers addressed the crowd. Members of NCOSH joined the procession, holding a banner that read “No More Hamlets- OSHA Reform Now!” Other groups from within the HRC and CARE coalitions also marched along. James Butler, president of the AFSCME Local 420, addressed the crowd, stating:

“The tragedy in Hamlet was a disgrace! In the richest country in the world, people are working under deplorable and unsafe conditions. They go to work to carve out a better life for themselves and their families, yet they never come home … Our hearts bleed for the families of these victims … Workers are threatened with the loss of their jobs if they

\textsuperscript{178} Folder 1150 in NCOSH, SHC.
\textsuperscript{179} Folder 1291 in NCOSH, SHC.
try to unionize, and safety and health enforcement is all but obsolete … For the sake of our lives, we need reform now.”

The groups that sponsored and participated in the May 2 March had mobilized effectively, using a show of solidarity to capture the anger, grief and disappointment present in Hamlet. The HRC had used the preceding months to shape its organizational apparatuses and develop a political agenda that would put safety and health reform at the forefront of North Carolina state politics. The pieces were now in place, but how would the coalition go about achieving meaningful legislation in the General Assembly?

**1992 Legislative Campaign**

On January 6, 1992, Ted Reynolds, Chairman of the North Carolina Poultry Industries Safety and Health Committee, made a statement before the North Carolina Legislative Research Commission on Fire and Occupational Safety in which he distanced the poultry industry from the Imperial Foods incident. In his view, Imperial had existed and acted as a rogue business. Imperial had not been a member of any of the state or national poultry associations nor did it operate as a normal producer. Imperial purchased chicken on the open market and then processed it for re-sale, an aberration within the normally vertically integrated poultry industry. Furthermore, Imperial avoided any safety activities or guidelines, something that the industry did not encourage. After establishing these facts, Reynolds painted the poultry business in a favorable manner, admitting, “we are not perfect,” but that the “industry … is working cooperatively on a national scope and a state-wide basis to improve its safety performance.” Reiterating the voluntary compliance ideas that had been a part of N.C. OSHA since its inception

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in 1976, Reynolds concluded that continued cooperation between business and government would improve the conditions in the workplace.  

On February 24, 1992, Linda Mabry gathered ten individuals from her newly developed injured workers network to testify in front of the same Commission, this time at Hamlet town hall. In addition to former workers of Imperial, other employees painted similar pictures in other industries. One had been fired for requesting a safety harness, another had become ill from repeated chemical exposure, and yet others, from Perdue, suffered from carpal tunnel syndrome. These voices contrasted deeply with the ideas of Reynolds, illustrating that safety and health had not stood at the forefront of industrial concerns. The workers’ testimony also placed Imperial firmly in the realm of other companies, contradicting “the picture of Imperial Foods as an isolated outlaw company among thousands of safety conscious North Carolina firms.”

Such competing visions of safety and health exemplify the challenges that the HRC faced in trying to enact meaningful workplace reform. N.C. OSHA had been developed and preserved within a climate of voluntary compliance and business progressivism, a subtle agreement between government and business that allowed for economic development with little government oversight. The tragedy at Hamlet provided a brief glimpse behind this ruse and allowed for the voice of laborers to puncture the business-dominated rhetoric of safe and happy workplaces in North Carolina. In this context, the 1992 campaign represented an opportunity for the HRC to “seize upon a brief window of opportunity to bring about meaningful and enduring reforms on

181 “A Statement of Ted Reynolds,” Folder 1297 in NCOSH, SHC.
182 “Legislative Study Commission Hearings,” NCOSH Safety and Health News, March 1992 in Folder 1625 in NCOSH, SHC.
behalf of the very people whose health and lives are quietly jeopardized each day by unsafe, unhealthy – and sometimes deadly – working conditions.”

On February 25, 1992, a day after the testimony of Mary Bryant and other workers throughout North Carolina, the HRC released a press statement that detailed what the coalition and public had learned about the Hamlet fire since it had occurred. The statement focused on the inadequacy of N.C. OSHA; it had never inspected the plant, it had underreported workplace fatalities in the past, and that it would take nearly 300 years for the current staff to inspect all the current businesses in North Carolina. To address these issues, the group proposed that the state take a harder stance on OSHA and workplace safety violations. The attention of Hamlet had highlighted the lack of inspections, but N.C. OSHA and the state needed to reorient policies toward the elimination of dangerous conditions and the championing of a positive attitude toward safety in the workplace.

The coalition followed up this release with a press conference, in March 1992, in front of the Legislative Building in Raleigh. The chosen date coincided with the fourth meeting of the Legislative Research Commission and featured speakers from the North Carolina AFL-CIO (NC AFL-CIO), NCOSH and other labor, religious, and environmental groups. A prepared statement called on the General Assembly to hear the voice of the workers and the community, and to pass workplace reform. Workers who speak out are often harassed, ostracized, or terminated, the coalition claimed, but the General Assembly had the power to change this dynamic and build safer workplaces. The message ended with an appeal to the people of North Carolina, calling on

183 “History,” Folder 1154 in NCOSH, SHC.
184 Folder 1244 in NCOSH, SHC.
them to apply collective pressure on their political leaders to act on behalf of those who face horrible conditions in the workplace.\textsuperscript{185}

After conducting four hearings and one drafting session, the Legislative Research Commission on Fire and Occupational Safety released its report that included proposals adopted from the different hearings.\textsuperscript{186} The proposals ultimately represented a compromise between labor and industry; however, workers’ representatives gained some key concessions from the Commission, including whistle blower protections, more enforcement power for N.C. OSHA, and a requirement for poorly performing companies to form safety committees. Industries often warded off stricter criminal penalties for negligence, and most legislative proposals became watered down from labor’s original intention.\textsuperscript{187} The Commission recommended sending the bill package to the General Assembly, allowing the HRC to clear one hurdle for workplace reform. Although the HRC had not persuaded the Commission to implement its full agenda, the report and its legislative package signaled that the General Assembly might be willing to act on behalf of Imperial survivors and other injured workers.

The next step in the process involved getting the legislature to pass the recommended workplace bills. Lucinda Wykle remembered the lobbying efforts that summer as a “battle,” one that relied on key members from the legislature, such as Dan Blue and Milton Fitch Jr., and broad cooperation between all the members of the HRC and the NC AFL-CIO. Operating with a divide and conquer strategy, members of the coalition would frequently split up and go speak

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} “Workplace Safety Legislation 1992,” Lucinda-Wykle Rosenberg Personal Files
with different politicians, come back together to figure out where they stood on certain actions, and then deploy resources as needed to convince legislators to vote a certain way.\textsuperscript{188} Mark Schulz recalled following the lobbyist lead of the NC AFL-CIO, buying a suit, shaving often, and changing his hairstyle to appeal to the respectability expected by members of the General Assembly. Although he had never had any experience lobbying for political change, he felt empowered by the presence of other progressive organizations and their commitment, via the HRC, to tackle larger workplace issues.\textsuperscript{189}

On June 17, the HRC held a press conference at the Legislative Building so that injured workers, many of whom had previously testified at the Commission hearings, appeared in front of those who would ultimately decide the fate of workplace reform. Former Imperial workers provided testimony about their harrowing experiences, and the HRC used the platform to advocate for the Commission’s legislative package.\textsuperscript{190} The voice of the workers, time and time again, would keep the Hamlet tragedy at the forefront of the occupational safety debate, with their individual horrors providing a clear picture of what a failure to act looked like.

The pro-business lobbyists, many of whom did not support the Commission proposals, matched the fervor of the HRC and its members. Lobbyists, many with long experience advocating in Raleigh, had the upper hand. They knew lawmakers on a first name basis and could wield their support in relation to future political campaigns or initiatives. Although the current proposals might disrupt some aspects of standard business practices, some corporate

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\textsuperscript{188} Lucinda Wykle-Rosenberg, interview by Derrick Kay, August 16, 2017.
\textsuperscript{189} Mark Schulz, interview by Derrick Kay, September 7, 2017.
\textsuperscript{190} “Injured Workers Speak Out for Workplace Safety Legislative,” Lucinda Wykle-Rosenberg Personal Files
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interests painted the proposed bills as an even bigger danger to the business community. Specifically, they depicted reform as a threat that would jeopardize a long history of anti-unionism and positive cooperation between the government and industry.  

Naturally, the two opposing groups sought to frame the debate through the recruitment and support of allies in the General Assembly. Dan Blue, Speaker of the House, threw his lot with the labor contingent, signing on as a co-sponsor of the labor bills and holding a press conference to make his thoughts on the issue clear. House Speaker Blue also invited Mary Bryant to speak there, allowing others to hear her powerful testimony about the fire and the horrible conditions that she and her fellow workers had faced at Imperial. Bryant’s testimony would further inspire Representative Milton Fitch Jr., a Democrat from Wilson, who invoked it during debates on the House floor, stating, “I can still hear her voice, choking with emotion, pleading for us to do something to prevent more Hamlets, more footprints on locked doors.” The image of the fire coupled with the image of individuals suffering provided a powerful message that swayed support toward occupational reform. Blue and Fitch helped to frame this image in the debate around the bills, drawing on the grief and emotion of Hamlet to underscore the need for fundamental workplace changes.

Not all legislators saw the emotional and painful appeal to Hamlet as an appropriate action. Representative John Kerr III, a Democrat from Goldsboro, felt that the bills represented an overreaction to Hamlet and that current efforts represented a knee-jerk reaction to the issues at

191 “How Workers Won”
hand. Kerr contended that “some groups out there … were using the Hamlet situation to do a lot more than address the deficiencies in the OSHA laws.” Instead, he felt that such troublemakers sought to undermine the relationships between employer and employee, threatening the positive business climate that had allowed North Carolina to grow over the course of the twentieth century. Other states, such as South Carolina, would not adopt these measures he argued, and therefore would lure industries away, endangering the economy because of an isolated incident and misguided reform effort. Ultimately, Kerr would be in the minority; however, his argument provided a clear critique of the workplace reform initiative.193

Speaker Blue’s support provided strength to the workplace bills. Nevertheless, debates between the House and Senate would eventually led to more compromise and the elimination of some of the stronger aspects of the legislative package. For example, in a conference meeting between the House and Senate, the House relented on a measure that would have allowed workers to sue their employers if their injuries came from using machinery that required safety guards. As part of an overall compromise involving whistle blower protection, the House agreed to drop the ability to sue from the bill and return it the Legislative Research Commission, which then allowed the whistle blower protections, minus the ability to sue over safety guards, to pass during the current session. These compromises weakened the overall power of the legislative package, but they were also essential in providing the necessary support for the measures to pass.194

193 “How Workers Won”
As the session ended in July 1992, the HRC and its constituent organizations looked proudly on the accomplishments achieved over the course of the summer. The General Assembly had passed laws that included whistle blower protections, safety committee mandates, new funding for safety inspectors, a construction budget for a new waste facility at North Carolina State University, a state agency bill that mandated state safety committees, and an agency cooperation bill that required the sharing of vital workplace information across different agencies in North Carolina. The summer had been a success because a broad range of organizations and individuals had acted in unison to voice their concerns for labor in North Carolina. The Imperial fire provided the initial impetus for reform, and the efforts of groups, such as the HRC, moved that momentum toward specific legislative gains. In an interview at the end of the legislative session, Chris Scott, of the NC AFL-CIO, commented that the new challenge involved making sure that “the momentum doesn’t die with the passage of these bills.”\footnote{Ibid.} The new laws represented a significant victory but would they be enforced consistently in the future?

In mid-July 1992, the \textit{Independent}, a weekly paper published in North Carolina’s Triangle region, ran an article entitled “How Workers Won,” which examined the progress made during the legislative session. The article declared labor the winner, highlighting the “landmark legislation” that had been forged together in the memory of the Hamlet tragedy.\footnote{“How Workers Won.”} The HRC Fall Conference, held in October, mirrored these celebratory sentiments. Dave Morrison, an attorney with the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers, praised the coalition, saying, “it was one of
the most constructive things he has ever been involved with,” and that its immense power came from “the diversity of groups and individuals interesting in improving workplace safety.” The tragedy had brought the need for reform to the attention of the public; but the coalition, especially the voices of individual workers, had successfully battled the entrenched interests and lax attitudes that had allowed the fire to happen in the first place.197

**Maintaining a Moment**

As many celebrated, the overall climate worried James Andrew, Secretary-Treasurer of the NC AFL-CIO. The summer had proved successful but now with legislation passed, the struggle over enforcement would continue and enacting additional measures would become increasingly difficult. The coalition would need to monitor the new laws and their application, making sure that the bills did not become a token gesture that did nothing for the lives of endangered workers.198 Mark Schulz shared these sentiments, especially in what he perceived as the eventual slipping of the Hamlet moment, a scenario he lamented in an interview about the achievements of 1992. In assessing future prospects, Schulz somberly stated, “the further we get away from the disaster the harder it’s gonna be to enact more changes.”199 The HRC had won a victory but how could the group go about sustaining the progress and sacrifice in the upcoming months and years?

In December 1992, Lucinda Wykle and Robin Hudson, a lawyer with North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers and the HRC, went before the Legislative Research Commission on

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197 “Hamlet Response Coalition for Workplace Reform Fall Conference Report,” Folder 1292 in NCOSH, SHC.
198 ibid.
199 “How Workers Won.”
Fire and Occupational Safety, convened for the second year in a row. Although the women had come to present seven recommendations for the Commission to consider regarding further workplace reform, they were shocked when legislators asked them for the names and addresses of those involved in the coalition. Questioning the motives and connection to the tragedy itself, two politicians from the Hamlet area chided the group’s use of the tragedy and its painful memories, claiming that the community and district had grown tired of negative publicity. The policymakers also questioned the inclusion of some groups, such as the N.C. Hunger Network, asking why they would have any interest in workplace safety. Such intimidation tactics, which the Raleigh News and Observer harkened back to McCarthyism and the Cold War, set the stage for the upcoming years; a time when the post-Hamlet moment of opportunity began to fade, limiting the prospects for sustained change to occupational safety and health in North Carolina.200

Ultimately, Wykle and Hudson presented their recommendations to the Commission; however, these women found “the mood of the legislature far less amenable to changes related to workplace health and safety,” than it had been only a few short months ago. Many of the legislators expressed concern with additional reforms, stating that they had appropriately responded to the tragedy in Hamlet. Business lobbyists in attendance used their proposal time to breach the topic of worker’s compensation reform; a worrying subject considering North Carolina had one of the lowest worker’s compensation rates in the United States. The Commission eventually settled on eight new proposals to present as a legislative package for

1993, but the representatives from the HRC walked away with growing concern about a reactionary attempt to restructure the worker’s compensation system.201

In her opening remarks for the fall 1993 HRC Conference, Lucinda Wykle stated:

“As much as 1992 was a year of landmark victories on workplace health and safety, 1993 was a year of backlash against working people in our state. Less than 2 years after the Hamlet fire brought us together to bring about improvements in working conditions, the insurance industry and big business launched a campaign to take away some of the few rights working people have in an attack on the worker’s compensation system.”202

At the beginning of the short session in May 1993, thirty-one Senators sponsored a worker’s compensation bill that sought to bring “balance and stability,” to the system, ultimately making it harder for employees to receive lost wages and healthcare while reducing the cost burden on companies and the government. The Senators cited the need to curb fraud and abuse in a giveaway system, the higher threshold for payouts would cut costs and make the whole system a more efficient use of government resources.203 The bill ultimately stalled in the North Carolina House of Representatives before re-emerging and passing during the 1994 short session.

In addition to battling with the legislature over the worker’s compensation issue, the HRC greatly expanded its educational and public awareness campaigns throughout 1993. The HRC conducted workshops for different union locals, at church council meetings, and at different colleges throughout the state. The group, particularly Wykle, conducted radio interviews centered on Hamlet and workplace safety in Asheville, Raleigh, Chapel Hill, Fayetteville, and Elizabeth City. A critique of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also became

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201 “Legislative Update,” Lucinda Wykle-Rosenberg Personal Files.
202 “Hamlet Response Coalition for Workplace Reform,” Lucinda Wykle-Rosenberg Personal Files.
part of the group’s focus, holding a briefing in Raleigh, a public forum in Greensboro, and a presentation at Warren Wilson College. In these educational endeavors, the organization continued to utilize the post-Hamlet moment as an opportunity to advance workplace educational initiatives, hoping to empower workers and citizens, informing them about how the safety laws should now operate in their state.\textsuperscript{204}

While the HRC focused on maintaining the legislative reforms, Mabry continued to develop the injured workers network under NCOSH. In 1992, Mabry and two injured workers from North Carolina attended the REJN annual conference, participating in a session of the Health and Safety working group that centered on injured workers and their organizing experiences in North Carolina and Louisiana. The conversation focused on issues of job loss, isolation, poverty, self-esteem, and bureaucratic barriers to fair compensation. One individual, Cathy Murdock, from the Louisiana Injured Workers Union, berated the labor movement, saying “The labor movement is losing members and withering away. Yet working people’s needs have never been as great or as desperate, and the labor movement needs to understand that their survival depends on them reaching out.” Murdock continued to define the problem, illustrating that unions were difficult to work with because they often lacked perspective from women, distrusted or felt threatened by outsiders or coalitions, did not address the needs of injured workers, nor did they try to engage with immigrants, all of whom could help fight for labor rights. After hearing worker testimonies and the pleas of those who felt left out of occupational concerns, the group settled in on some common solutions: encouraging injured worker

\textsuperscript{204} Folder 1204 in NCOSH, SHC.
organization efforts, advocacy for youth and international workers, building connections between injured workers and unions, as well as engaging in broad range coalitions, such as that with environmental and church groups, that reflected multiple perspectives on labor issues.\textsuperscript{205}

Murdock’s perspective mirrors some of the issues that Mabry, individually, and NCOSH, organizationally, had with organizing around injured workers. For Mabry, the Hamlet tragedy opened the floodgates for larger stories of workplace negligence and injury. Without the fire, injured workers, even those in unions, would not have been able to share their stories or be heard within occupational safety and health reforms. Mabry viewed the injured workers network as an advocacy tool, one that allowed individuals to share their personal struggles while pulling at the heart strings of the public and politicians who could enact reforms. More importantly though, Mabry felt that the network was constructed and envisioned as a vehicle for empowerment; injured workers could and would be trained then they would be allowed to go independent or get a seat on the NCOSH Board (a goal that Mabry laments never quite accomplishing).\textsuperscript{206}

Remembering the injured workers network and its involvement in NCOSH and the HRC, Leah Wise felt that it was “really tough,” because, beyond the pain and isolation, the network also “challenged the organizing style that the labor movement had, which many, the male led community groups followed.”\textsuperscript{207} Wise remembered this dynamic playing out within NCOSH, Mabry seeing the needs and plight of the unorganized, injured workers while NCOSH maintained its overall focus on organized labor. Although Mabry balanced the needs of both

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\textsuperscript{205} “Southern Regional Economic Justice Network: Building Just Relationships for the Next 500 Years,” September 24-27, 1992, Leah Wise Personal Files
\textsuperscript{206} Linda Mabry, interview by Derrick Kay, September 26, 2017, transcript in author’s possession
\textsuperscript{207} Leah Wise, interview by Derrick Kay, January 10, 2018, transcript in author’s possession
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groups, Mabry turned to her peers in the REJN to receive support and help with organizing the injured, something that was well received but not wholly embraced by NCOSH due to its background within the organized labor movement. Even after Mabry left NCOSH in October 1994, the group still tried to maintain connections with injured workers. However, the Executive Director of that period, Tom O’ Connor, felt that organizing those workers remained a difficult task for NCOSH, especially given the many hurdles those individuals faced due to physical, emotional, and bureaucratic issues with the workers’ compensation system.\(^\text{208}\) Ultimately, NCOSH was unable to create a self-sustaining or long-term injured workers network, but their involvement during and after the fire created a lasting impact within the organizing structures of the organization, challenging NCOSH to mobilize workers outside the realm of organized labor.

The post-Hamlet debates surrounding occupational safety and health rose again after twenty-year-old Ignacio Enriquez died in October of 1993 while working at the Carolina Turkey plant in Mount Olive, North Carolina. Enriquez died while being pulled into a grinding machine that had previously had the safety guard removed, an issue that the HRC had discussed at the Legislative Research Commission the previous December. The death sparked an investigation by the North Carolina Department of Labor, which found forty-five safety violations and levied a fine of $94,900. These findings greatly contrasted to an earlier inspection, in September 1992, which had reported no issues within the plant. After tallying all the fines, Carolina Turkey appealed the amount, and the state ultimately levied a fine of $75,800, a 20 percent penalty reduction.\(^\text{209}\)

\(^\text{208}\) Tom O’ Connor, interview by Derrick Kay, July 27, 2017, transcript in author’s possession
The incident and the discovery of such extensive violations led the HRC to focus on the hazardous nature of the poultry industry throughout much of 1994. Instead of concentrating solely on the loss of life, like with the Hamlet fire, the HRC highlighted issues of repetitive motion injuries, carpal tunnel syndrome, and the inadequacy of North Carolina’s compensation system. Two days before Thanksgiving, NCOSH and the HRC held a press conference and demonstration in front of the offending turkey plant. Chanting “Carolina Turkeys – Cluck, cluck, cluck - they'll do anything to make a buck,” and holding signs that included “#1 in Turkey - #1 in Injury,” fifty individuals picketed the company, forcing it to shut down for the day to prevent any potential contact between pro-union advocates and its current non-unionized workforce. The group attempted to find an employee to speak about life at the plant; however, the fear of termination led most people to say no. The HRC eventually recruited a retired worker, Bertha Carr, to speak, a brave endeavor given the reach of the company’s influence throughout the surrounding area. After hearing of repetitive and fast motions injuries, carried out day-after-day, hour-after-hour, the group called on state and federal officials to take immediate action to reduce line speeds and the risk of injuries.210

Such calls to action converged with HRC’s major priorities in 1994, especially given the fact that small gains could have larger impacts on safety and health in the workplace. For example, an ergonomic standard, which could reduce repetitive motion injuries, would also reduce burdens on the worker’s compensation system, lowering costs through safety and not benefit cuts. This same logic applied to various other priorities, including federal OSHA reform.

and expanding health and safety measures so that less injuries and less claims occurred. Although the HRC clearly attempted to articulate this viewpoint, opponents saw additional regulations as inefficient. The research of preventative techniques and the hiring of more inspectors added costs to the government budget or took profits out of a company’s pocket.211

The HRC also completed and published a major educational project, the Workers’ Rights Manual, a booklet that mirrored the educational resource books that COSH groups had produced since the 1970s. Available in Spanish and English, the resource guide covered worker’s compensation, union organizing, repetitive motion injuries, and workplace disability. The manual also included farmworkers and youth employment, populations typically not addressed by organized labor, illustrating a shift that NCOSH would adopt in the second half of the 1990s. Nine individuals, representing five different groups, put the booklet together, compiling and reviewing all its aspects to ensure that it would be an effective guide for all workers in North Carolina.212

Over the course of 1994, participation in the activities of the coalition began to wane as political hostility increased, framed around welfare and compensation reform, and the different member organizations settled back into their own organizational agendas. In a planning document, from the fall of 1994, Joanna Miller, Director of SEJ, reflected that the HRC had “good participation” for the two years after the fire but that recent meetings had been less widely attended. In those same documents, SEJ created a work plan that featured programming across many avenues, including women empowerment, youth program services, public policy, and

211 Folder 1205 in NCOSH, SHC.
educational opportunities. Work within the HRC overlapped, especially in the public policy realm, but represented only a fraction of the focus that member groups gave to other aspects of their organizations and missions. Similarly, BWFJ still focused its efforts on organizing the South and helping those affected by incidents like Hamlet; however, they also shifted toward a national focus and the founding of a political party that could embody the needs of exploited labor, especially African Americans. These actions, outside the purview of the coalition, slowly led toward fragmentation. Groups remained in contact and worked on similar, progressive issues, but operated in individualized ways that fulfilled their organization’s unique missions.

On May 1, 1995, Lucinda Wykle sent her resignation letter to the members of the HRC, stating that she would no longer operate as Coordinator as of June 1. Her husband had accepted a job offer in Boston, Massachusetts. Wykle recalled that the HRC had undergone a transformation by the end of her time in 1995; one in which it had largely transitioned away from the legislative component and moved toward more educational and media coverage efforts. The transition had largely been written within the framework of the Coalition. The initial goal was to pass legislative reform; however, as opposition mounted and the public became less sympathetic, the Coalition turned toward education and public awareness as the means of keeping the Hamlet moment alive. The organization existed for a short time after Wykle left; however, as funds ran out and groups reflected on the overall success of the initial mission, the short-term window of opportunity closed. Though these groups continued to interact and work alongside each other, the Hamlet Response Coalition had officially run its course.

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213 Folders 1790 and 1805 in SEJ, SHC.  
The last major operation of the HRC occurred on June 1 at the Broyhill Furniture plant in Lenoir, North Carolina. The location had two significant features: it had been the site of an explosion in 1994, which killed one worker and injured five more, and it operated in the district of Cass Ballenger, a Representative in Congress from 1986 to 2005. Rain poured down as twenty activists, including union local members from King’s Mountain, Hickory, and Raleigh-Durham, and NCOSH staff, protested the federal OSHA reform measures advocated by Representative Ballenger. Following on the heels of the Republican’s “Contract with America,” federal OSHA came under attack for its perceived unnecessary regulations. Ballenger had proposed that OSHA, on both the state and national level, should follow a more voluntary and self-regulating compliance model.215 In their rejection of Ballenger’s stance, protestors channeled the memory of Hamlet, remarking that “progress” on the Ballenger bill would represent a step back toward the conditions that had allowed the Hamlet tragedy to occur.216 The predominant presence of NCOSH at this rally represented the waning nature of the HRC, allowing NCOSH to once again take center stage in the battle for occupational safety and health.

NCOSH in the New Century

In 1996, NCOSH held a strategic planning meeting on Emerald Isle, North Carolina, to focus on what it could “do in the next 3-5 years to strengthen workplace health and safety given worker and member needs, and organizational capacity in the current social and political conditions?” The retreat included the members of the NCOSH board, staff members, and Tobi

Lippin, now a consultant with the New Perspectives Consulting Group. Attendees saw the need to strengthen labor and community connections; and develop relationships with the Latino community, and with more schools and church groups. Moreover, the group also wanted the organization to have a diverse racial and ethnic mix, having activists in NCOSH who represented the wide variety of people they worked with in North Carolina. Legislative policies, such as enforcing the 1992 laws, remained a top priority, even though the group recognized the limitations of sustained reform due to the strong pro-business lobby offensive launched during and after the 1992 session.217

NCOSH would eventually emerge out of the 1990s a far different organization than it had been entering the decade. The Hamlet fire had provided the need for broader coalition building and a turn toward unorganized labor while changes in the North Carolina economy prompted a further shift toward other unorganized workers. In 1995, NCOSH membership consisted of over forty locals from sixteen different unions, a few different general labor boards and councils, such as the North Carolina Council of the APWU, and a wide range of groups, including BWFJ and CWF. By 2001, NCOSH consisted of over thirty locals from nineteen different unions, but had also expanded to encompass participation by the N.C. Farmworker Services, El Centro Hispano, and the NC Alliance for Worker Justice.218

These changes also indicate how NCOSH approached its mission, slowly moving away from the union focus and toward trainings that involved injured workers, Latino workers, and

217 “Strategic Planning Report,” Folder 1740 in NCOSH, SHC.
218 “NCOSH Union Local Members,” Folder 1652 in NCOSH, SHC.; “25 Years of Health & Safety Justice,” Lorrie Bradley Personal Files.
unorganized labor. By the mid-1990s, union membership and dues provided only about 5 percent of the operating budget, whereas grants for hazardous materials and other forms of technical training constituted a large amount of the budget.\textsuperscript{219} The overall unionization rate in North Carolina continued to decline over this period as well, dropping from 6.4 percent in 1988 to 3.7 percent in 2000.\textsuperscript{220} These factors drastically altered how NCOSH operated but also allowed it to focus on new areas of concern, primarily among youth and immigrant workers.

In 1998, NCOSH helped to launch the Association of Latino/a Workers of North Carolina (ASTLANC), a group that would work to educate and organize immigrants to protect themselves from abuses of power at the hands of their employers. The ASTLANC initially had difficulty reaching these communities; however, NCOSH launched a Job Information Center out of El Centro Hispano that allowed the organization to expand its role in educating the immigrant community. ASTLANC also presented a unique opportunity for further relationship building. Activists from the group participated in a broad range of campaigns, including a rally for dockworkers in South Carolina and a vigil with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) in Mount Olive. The group also helped to establish the African American Latino Alliance, an organization that sought to establish dialogue between the two races and offer information and education around abuses of those minorities in the workplace.

The Job Information Center, launched in 2000, aimed to place immigrant workers in safe and steady jobs, pulling them out of the oppressive system of day laboring. To participate,

\textsuperscript{219} Folder 1740 in NCOSH, SHC.
workers attended an orientation session about workplace laws and rights in North Carolina and then interacted with videos, games, and role-playing to launch discussions about how to handle discriminatory or unsafe scenarios within the work environment. The Center’s proximity to the NCOSH office and the Latino community allowed for better communication and referrals between those who had received services and those who had not. As the Job Information Center expanded, NCOSH also encouraged participation in ASTLANCE, an opportunity to develop connections within and around the community.

The launch of ASTLANCE also coincided with the beginning of another NCOSH initiative, the Youth at Work Project. The project sought “to inform young people of workplace issues, including common causes of injuries, matters of discrimination, and labor laws,” and centered around three connected outreach mechanisms: youth trainings, statewide poster and essay contests, and youth internships across the state. NCOSH held training sessions throughout North Carolina during the school months and often targeted rural areas or students. As a reflection on NCOSH’s new found goal to engage with more churches, the NCOSH Youth at Work Coordinator also held sessions for church groups and other civic organizations. The internship program, the most ambitious aspect of the project, set up local youth with nonprofits to gain work experience and learn more about worker’s rights. Overall, the Youth at Work Project expanded the reach of NCOSH into a younger audience, providing opportunities to empower those individuals to speak up about workplace safety issues.221

221 “25 Years of Health & Safety Justice,” Lorrie Bradley Personal Files.
The fire at Imperial Food Products in 1991 highlighted the concerns of occupational safety and health advocates in North Carolina while simultaneously revealing the challenges of broad workplace reform based within the COSH and organized labor movement. The injured and unorganized had largely been silenced prior to the Hamlet moment; however, the fire allowed their voices to be heard, injured workers and unorganized laborers becoming an important aspect of advocacy and change in North Carolina. NCOSH’s involvement with the REJN, HRC, and injured workers networks broadened the COSH model to include environmental and religious organization, unorganized and injured workers, as well as other community and economic justice oriented groups. This expanded vision allowed NCOSH to integrate their organized approach toward different groups of people, building a vision of occupational safety and health that was far more inclusive and encompassing of different segments of labor in North Carolina.

While the changing composition of the North Carolina workplace after the fire created barriers to continued success for NCOSH, its previous experiences with broad ranging groups, such as those in the HRC, offered the mechanisms for tackling these new obstacles. The unionization rate had always been low in the state, but as it dipped even further throughout the 1990s, NCOSH balanced its focus on organized labor with an infusion of new multiracial groups and opportunities to challenge prevailing issues in the workplace, such as discrimination and the exploitation of youth or immigrant workers. NCOSH never abandoned the COSH model of a coalition of organized labor, health professionals and lawyers; instead, it enlarged the concept, finding ways to incorporate unorganized labor and workers of color into viable opportunities for workplace education.
CONCLUSION

In 2001, past and present members, volunteers, and staff of NCOSH met at the Teamsters Union Hall in Raleigh to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization. The evening included a dinner and a video, prepared by members of the board, which featured clips and interviews from people from different activities and campaigns, including that of the BLA. Lorrie Bradley, who began working at NCOSH during her senior year at the University of North Carolina as part of a service learning opportunity, organized the event, calling old members, soliciting donations and stories, and preparing a 25th Anniversary booklet. The booklet, produced in a bilingual format, chronicled the state of NCOSH with current campaign summaries sitting among congratulatory advertisements from member groups. The juxtaposition of the Spanish and English text reflected the ongoing changes to labor in North Carolina and within NCOSH itself. In remembering the mood of the moment, Bradley recalled people being “very complimentary of the work that NCOSH had done,” and being happy to see that NCOSH “was still going, still working on new projects, and taking on new things.” The event represented a culmination of twenty-five years, a legacy of collaborating and building safer and healthier workplaces in North Carolina.

At that time NCOSH represented thirty-seven union locals, six labor councils situated throughout the state, and other statewide groups, including the N.C. AFL-CIO, North Carolina Chapter of the American Federal of Teachers, North Carolina Professional Fire Fighters, and one worker association in the auto and aerospace industry. NCOSH also featured a ten-person staff,

222 Lorrie Bradley, interview with Derrick Kay, October 29, 2017, transcript in author’s possession.
many of whom were involved in the Job Information Center and ASTLANC. These groups interlaced the old and new, the APWU, a long time NCOSH member, sitting on the board alongside new members who represented the budding organizations built around Latino labor organizing. Even among these changes, NCOSH had largely retained its underlying mission, “to provide all NC workers with research, technical assistance, training, and information about employees’ rights and work-related hazards.” Reflecting the challenges brought forth by the Hamlet moment, NCOSH also sought to “enforce existing laws and pass new laws to make workplaces and communities safer and healthier.”

NCOSH had largely remained an advocacy and educational group, extending its reach deeper into the community, over time, while maintaining relationships with the medical, legal, and organized labor constituencies that had underwritten the initial COSH experiment in North Carolina.

By 2001, NCOSH had also begun to take on an expanded role in the national affairs of workers throughout the United States. As a member of an informally structured National COSH network, NCOSH took a leading role in the “Vulnerable Workers Project,” which included coordination of the eighteen COSH groups nationwide and over $720,000 in federal OSHA funding. The project sought to take the informal network in a “new direction,” one in which the groups collectively reached “out to those workers who are most vulnerable to workplace hazards, including immigrants, youth, temporary and part-time employees, and low-wage workers.” This focus mirrored the expertise garnered by NCOSH during the 1990s, and the efforts included a


223 “25 Years of Health & Safety Justice,” Lorrie Bradley personal files.
“vast majority of … workers [who] do not belong to unions and do not have access to any health and safety training from any other source.”\textsuperscript{224}

On the heels of that campaign, NCOSH continued to take on an increasingly active role in the national movement, becoming a fundamental building block to the formally created National COSH Network in 2003. Mirroring the national AFL-CIO model, this new, collective group sought to advocate on the federal level, directing policy discussions and carrying out nationwide campaigns that includes advocacy, research, and trainings among the different COSH groups. The NCOSH Director, Tom O’Connor, transitioned toward a half-and-half role of working with NCOSH and being the coordinator of the budding organization, for a brief period. Eventually, he became the full time national coordinator, a career move that would last up until his retirement in the mid-2010s. His replacement, Amy Kaufman, would also take on a dual role between the national and state COSH group.\textsuperscript{225}

In the years following this transition, NCOSH faded and ceased to operate.\textsuperscript{226} The national focus pulled staff away from the state organization, leaving the group without some of its most experienced members. In the mid-2000s, NCOSH put together a transition team that sought to organize the group’s finances and keep the organization together. By this time, the staff had dwindled to two full time employees and the board had shrunk to five members. Unable to

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{226} The factors and events that led to the decline of the organization remain somewhat obscured within the historical record. The last batch of archival evidence was deposited in the Southern Historical Collection in July of 2002 and many of the more recent employees or members were more difficult to locate, remembered only small nondescript fragments about this period, or declined to speak about the subject altogether.
keep the group afloat, the organization carried on for a brief time, eventually moving to Greensboro and running out of the home of the Director.227

There are several possible explanations for NCOSH’s demise. The transition toward a Latino and youth labor focus would have deprived NCOSH of some of its funding sources, these groups often being outside the purview of organized labor in the state. The climate for occupational safety and health, particularly for immigrants, also faced some backlash during the Bush Administration. Between 2001 and the end of 2007, OSHA issued 86 percent fewer rules or regulations than the agency did under Clinton. Deregulation coupled with an increasing stigma against illegal immigration, especially in places like North Carolina, would have undoubtedly made the work of NCOSH more difficult, especially during a transitory time within the organization itself.228

Although defunct by the mid-to-late 2000s, NCOSH had left an indelible mark on the lives of those who volunteered, worked for, or organized alongside the group. Many of the participants remained in the occupational safety and health field, in a wide variety of roles: one conducting research and distributing grants with NIOSH, another defending workers’ and their rights in California, another a professor of Public Health. Others stayed in Durham as local activists: one consulting for organizations and groups, and another remaining on the NCOSH staff or board for almost the entirety of its existence.

227 Carol Brooke, Phone Conversation with author, March 6, 2018. Brooke was a member of the NCOSH Transition Team, she recalled the dates being around 2006-2007.
NCOSH had come a long way since 1976, transforming itself from a technical adjunct to the Brown Lung Association into a full-fledged occupational safety and health work center, a community based institution that sought to provide support and organizational infrastructure to the laboring, immigrant, or low wage members of the community. Building itself initially on the COSH model, NCOSH stretched those boundaries over time, not always through its own circumstances, to incorporate some of the most vulnerable laboring groups from workplaces throughout North Carolina. These accommodations were often difficult, navigating racial and gender differences that had often been ignored by proponents of organized labor. Additionally, NCOSH continually battled the “business progressive” atmosphere that had championed the maximization of profit and the recruitment of industry over the health and safety concerns of workers. Even among all these challenges, NCOSH adapted over time, eventually building itself into a crucial aspect of the unorganized and organized labor environment of North Carolina and the United States.

The National COSH movement continues to operate in the United States, organizing itself around fourteen established COSHs, many of which came to be in the years right before and immediately following the initial creation of NCOSH, and seven associate COSHs, newly formed groups that seek to deal with occupational safety and health issues. These organizations remain clustered in and around the Northeast and Pacific coast, areas with higher rates of

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unionization and friendlier attitudes towards unions. Three groups punctuate the South, COSH minded associate organizations in Texas, Florida, and Tennessee.\textsuperscript{230}

The COSH movement is mirrored by an ongoing “alt-labor” trend that focuses on the “potential of non-traditional alliances and organizational forms that might similarly advance worker causes even if they are not formally labor unions or ultimately lead to collective bargaining contracts.” Unlike the COSH movement, however, alt-labor groups tend to forgo the need for collective bargaining, arguing that the prevailing legal environment favors management over labor and thus it is better to work outside of the reach of the National Labor Relations Board instead of inside it. Both groups seek to engage the community, using worker and public pressure to force policy makers to act on workplace, economic, and social justice issues.\textsuperscript{231}

NCOSH, and its story, sit at an intriguing intersection of seemingly conflicting ideas, illustrating how an organization may operate within a hostile, anti-union environment and remain an important component to the successes of organized and unorganized labor alike. If collective bargaining offers little to the worker, as it has in North Carolina, then how does a group counterbalance that force? The story of NCOSH would indicate those answers potentially lie among direct action campaigns centered around communal concerns and a broad range of diverse constituencies. Right-to-know legislation on the local and state levels would not have been possible without the support and engagement of citizens throughout Durham, the campaign raising awareness about chemical exposure hazards among laborers and the right of a community

\textsuperscript{231} Marc Dixon, “Union Organizing and Labor Outreach in the Contemporary United States” Sociology Compass, 8 (2014): 1187.
to know what substances were being used in their neighborhoods. The post-Hamlet legislative reforms would not have succeeded without the voice of the injured and the collaboration among environmental, religious, labor, legal, and other progressive organizations. These lessons illustrate the way forward for proponents of labor, highlighting the necessity of reframing occupational safety and health not simply as a working-class issue, but one that encompasses the full health and safety of the community, its members, and the surrounding environment.
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