



Down Home North Carolina Annual Report 2020



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How can we put a year like 2020 into words?

It's not possible to capture the fear, the hope, the loss, and the courage that every one of us has felt. We take comfort in knowing that readers of this letter have come through this time with us, that is, through the virus, the police violence, the protests, and finally, the election. Enduring such challenges has made us more grateful than ever for our Down Home community.

While all of us experienced 2020, we cannot claim to have shared equally in its risks and hardships. This is because, long before COVID19, life for many Down Home members was already a walk along the edge of a precarious cliff. Yet, the virus's fallout in terms of layoffs and illness have deepened the pit and eroded its rim.

The past year has exposed the brutality of America's class and race system. Because the American economy depends on the labor of the most vulnerable, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and white "essential workers" have been forced to risk the health and lives of their families all so that wealthier classes can stay safe. Our members are fast-food workers, delivery drivers, store clerks, teachers, and hospitality workers who know that with eviction and debt moratoriums set to expire, things are harder than ever.

Our hope comes from our own efforts to survive and take care of one another. Down Home has always emphasized the magic of face-to-face conversations and in-person meetings, but this year we had to move differently. Out of necessity, we've accepted the need to engage digitally but we've also launched a mutual aid fund, boosted our bail fund, and helped to create a statewide platform for holding the NC General Assembly accountable during this crisis.

We've done even more; we've shown up with a vision for our collective futures. When George Floyd, a native of Raeford, North Carolina, was killed by police, our rural communities exploded with grief, rage, and a determination to make Black Lives Matter everywhere. Across the state, Down Home members were on the small-town front lines demanding change and reform.

Cover photo by Down Home Jackson member Nichole Visnesky of a Black Lives Matter protest in Sylva, North Carolina

Our members not only survived 2020, but they also fought for power. We are endlessly inspired by our working-class candidates of color who ran courageous, shoe-string campaigns that smashed age-old color barriers. We celebrate the historic wins of our member Keshia Sandidge, who will integrate the all-white Cabarrus County School Board, and of Ricky Hurtado, the first Latinx legislator ever elected in North Carolina.

Yet, even as we rejoice over these successes we know that the stakes for North Carolina's rural working people have never been higher, nor have the risks been greater. That is why in 2021, we must continue to push for the expansion of Medicaid and get the healthcare we need to survive a deadly pandemic; we need to challenge an unjust bail system that holds those who can't afford to purchase their freedom in jail while awaiting trial; and we absolutely must fight for affordable housing, fair wages, and the sound future Down Home members elected to office would help guarantee.

The resiliency, the genius, and the grit of our communities became clear in 2020. The road ahead will be hard, but we have a future and we are willing to fight for it, together.

Yours in power, yours in love,



Brigid Flaherty, Todd Zimmer,
and the team at Down Home North Carolina

Chapter
Member
Retreats

- Members speak at Raising Wages Town Hall
- Door knocking for primaries

- Voter mobilization for two member-candidates in Alamance Democratic Primaries; both make it through primary
- Transition to virtual meetings to flatten the curve
- Launch of **Down Home Mutual Aid Fund**

- Car demonstration in Rockingham County to push Phil Berger to offer COVID relief to North Carolinians
- **United for Survival and Beyond Platform** launches; members participate in car demonstration at NCGA
- Relaunch **Deep Canvassing** via phone

- **Weaponization of Healthcare teach-in**
- **Medicaid Expansion petition** launched
- Members **draft local platforms**

- Launch of **What's On the Ballot?** workshops to educate communities about local elections
- Host **Raising Wages** webinar
- Members interview local candidates
- BLM protests across rural NC

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

WE ENDED UP CARING ABOUT EACH OTHER: DEEP CANVASSING IN 2020

By Dan Bayer, a long-time member of the Down Home Deep Canvassing team



Photo of Dan Bayer by Sugelema Lynch

This past fall, Bonnie Dobson was working from her home in Mebane, North Carolina. Bonnie was part of Down Home's Deep Canvassing team and was involved in a project that sought to sway voters' allegiances from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. She had picked up the phone and called a woman on her list named Linda. "She was a white woman, very Southern, born and raised in North Carolina," recalls Bonnie. "She was a Trump supporter."

"I told her that my husband had lost his job and that it was really tough because I didn't know how we were going to make ends meet," Bonnie continues. "She explained that [her family] had gone through tough times in the past, so we bonded over that."

As she had been trained, Bonnie continued asking questions and carefully listening to Linda's responses. "We talked about race relations, and there's where it got a little tricky. Linda expressed that she was not prejudiced, but she didn't understand why people were looting and rioting after George Floyd was murdered. Prior to that, I had not explained to Linda that I was black. So I told her I was, and what my experience over the years had been being African-American."

"At that point she kind of got quiet, and tried to tell me that I was 'different.' I said, *I'm really not, to be honest with you.* We talked about how we're all human, and by the end of the call Linda completely understood where I was coming from. She moved...from being a Trump supporter to being not sure," Bonnie says. "She told her husband, who was sitting next to her, that my husband was out of work and he offered him a job. We ended up friends. It was a great conversation, with a woman I probably would never have talked to on the street, and we ended up caring about one another."

In 2020, Down Home's Deep Canvassing team held thousands of conversations just like this one. In fact, Deep Canvassers and other Down Home volunteers had over 28,800 conversations like Bonnie and Linda's this year.

Deep Canvassing has become a crucial part of Down Home's outreach efforts in rural areas over the last two years, and it became an essential tool in our efforts around the 2020 elections. Pioneered by the Los Angeles LGBT Center in the aftermath of California's passage of Proposition 8, Deep Canvassing hinges on a radical bit of inspiration: What if instead of *talking at people* in an effort to sway their opinions on a controversial issue, you instead *talked with them*?

Down Home's Deep Canvassing, often done in concert with People's Action, has been expansively used to interact with North Carolina voters around issues such as universal healthcare, undocumented immigration, and, now, candidate persuasion. The goal is to have honest, face-to-face discussions with people— a method that resonates with how rural North Carolina ticks. Deep Canvassers seek to find the source of voter's feelings about controversial issues and hear the personal stories behind those feelings. In return, canvassers also share their own struggles, creating a sense of human connection that can transcend deep-seated prejudices.



Bonnie Dobson, member of Down Home's Deep Canvassing team, lives in Alamance County. Photo submitted by member.

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- Down Home and partners launch **Vote NC concert** online
- **Rising to the Emergency: Education and COVID** Webinar
- Chapters launch **Relational Voter Turnout**
- Members vote on local endorsements

- **Porch Politics** discussion series launched
- Chapters **announce endorsed candidates**
- **Numbers at Nine** election videos launched

- **Mass Bail Out** in response to major COVID-19 outbreak in Alamance County jail
- **Reclaiming Rural** storytelling project launched

- **Overdose Town Hall** in Western NC
- **Dreama Day** in Alamance
- Chapters host **Local Candidate Town Halls**
- VoteNC.org **Get Out the Vote Concert**
- **Southerners for Medicaid Expansion Virtual Vigil**
- Members in 5 counties lead early voting **poll protection**

- November 3rd General Election
- DHNC builds **statewide coalition to protect the vote**, including mobilizations to Raleigh

- **Bail fund** launched in Cabarrus

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC



"Deep Canvasser Amy Cooper stands with activists in Graham, NC."

Down Home member Amy Cooper had worked more traditional canvassing jobs before, but found that "no one wanted to talk." Deep canvassing interested her because it is based around storytelling. Amy says that she would share her personal healthcare story to open up conversations while Deep Canvassing. "If I hadn't qualified for Medicaid, with the pregnancy condition I had, I would've died," she explains. "For them to know that *Wow, this person who's talking to me, if they hadn't been covered by insurance, they would've died.* That's a real thing."

Studies by researchers David Broockman of UC Berkeley and Josh Kalla of Yale have shown that Deep Canvassing is more effective at changing voters' attitudes than traditional political outreach methods such as advertising and shorter, more transactional canvassing. This makes it promising for organizing in rural communities where people's viewpoints trend towards traditional and conservative.

Part of changing voter's minds is allowing them to talk to those whose life stories have been distorted through cultural stereotypes, such as those who use public assistance or are the victims of police violence, putting a human face on what otherwise could just remain conservative talking points.

By telling their own stories, canvassers can change the underlying narratives that candidates and politicians in the rural South play upon when they appeal to people's prejudices.

Forcing voters to acknowledge the contradictions between what they're told about how our economic system is supposed to operate and the real-world experiences of themselves and others is key to how deep canvassing works, says Amy. "Things that are stigmatized really need to be worked on by Deep Canvassing."

"Deep Canvassing can certainly be used for race relations and LGBTQ rights," says Dobson, thinking about the potential of the work in the future and reflecting on the transformative conversations she has been able to have through the project.

"Everyone just wants a chance to share their story and be heard," agrees Amy.



Gabe Baldasare walks door to door, before Down Home's work evolved into phone canvassing due to the pandemic. Photo by Sugelema Lynch.

We Know How to Keep Each Other Safe: Protecting Polls in Rural North Carolina

Lisa Montelongo remembers the long road trips made as a child from California to the Qualla Boundary. Her mother raised her family on the west coast but made sure her children knew their Cherokee roots. **“Being Native, you have no choice but to understand who you are,”** Lisa explains. At age eighteen, she moved permanently to the North Carolina Cherokee reservation and since then it has been home to her own children and grandchildren; undoubtedly, it will be a much-cherished home to family generations yet to come.

“We are all guests on this land,” clarifies Lisa, **“and we need to protect it.”** Political action is part of that care ethic. Lisa recalls the frequent motorcades this past summer and fall that honked horns, revved engines, and waved MAGA flags. The motorcades showed up in Sylva, Bryson City, Waynesville, and Maggie Valley, tracing the outline of the Qualla Boundary and putting people on edge. “It was old fashioned intimidation,” she states, “meant to make people not feel comfortable or feel like outsiders on their own land.”

In response, Lisa joined with Down Home and the Native Vote 2020 initiative; the idea was to register local folks to vote and to then protect the polling locations where Cherokee voters and other local residents would cast ballots. Lisa, along with her daughter and other neighbors, helped to register sixty-five people; most of those individuals were first-time voters. She says that registering an 85-year-old woman to vote in her first election helped her understand the pivotal moment both the Qualla Boundary and the nation is in.

“Racism is nothing new here,” she says. “There is a lot of historical trauma in our community and a deep mistrust because of this. Having a presence at the polling places helped to make it feel safe for the people I know.”

In solidarity with Lisa’s views, **Down Home North Carolina mobilized members from Graham to Cherokee.**

Beginning with early voting, and continuing through election day itself, over fifty Down Home members and volunteers worked to create a welcoming presence at polling stations across rural North Carolina and to protect the right of voters to cast their votes without intimidation. At Down Home, we believe this to be central to American democracy.

To the left: Down Home members engaging in poll protection during the early voting period in Alamance, Cabarrus, and Haywood counties.



CHAPTER BY CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

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This year, Down Home Madison members:

- Successfully launched their chapter in July 2020 and created their chapter platform
- Spoke with hundreds of local residents and did community surveys to inform the launching of their chapter
- Interviewed seven candidates and voted to endorse four, including a Down Home member, in the local elections
- Built strong partnerships with other local community members organizing around racial justice, police reform, and a proposed asphalt plant

This year, Down Home Haywood members:

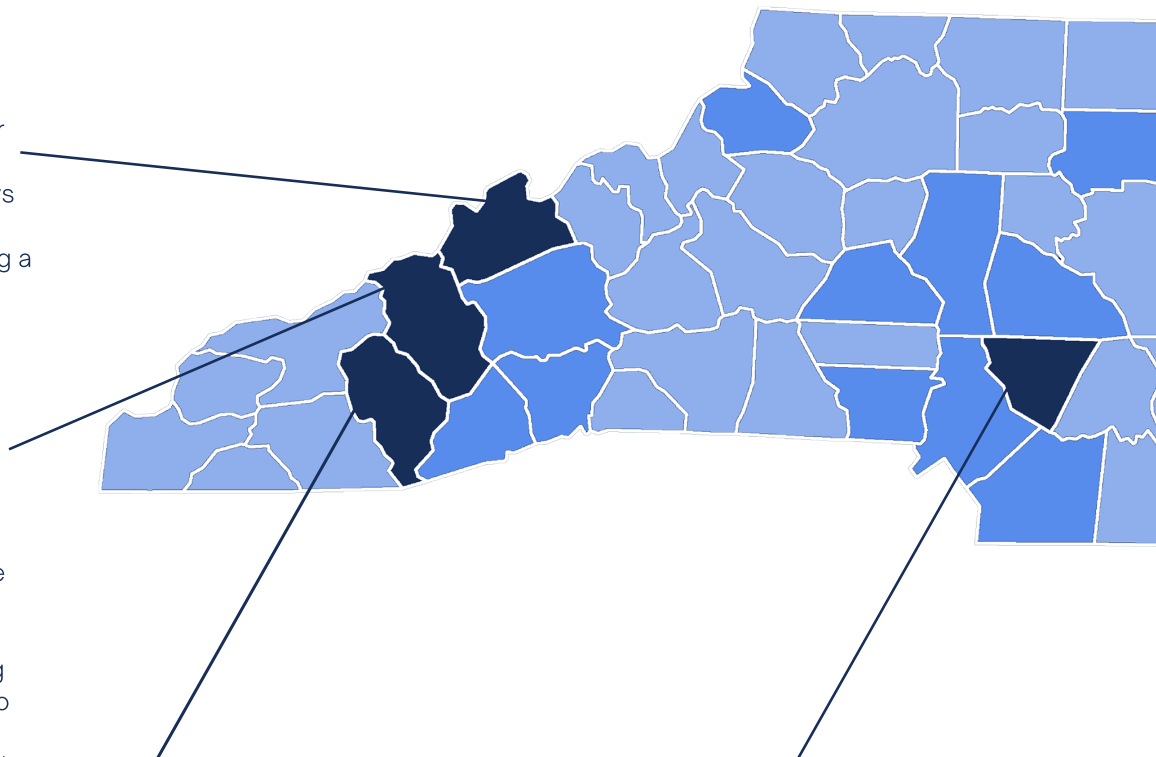
- Held teach-ins and educational events begin organizing against a proposed jail expansion
- Wrote opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and a significant online campaign supporting the most diverse slate of candidates for the local school board in county history
- Supported local housing efforts during COVID19, including hosting fundraisers to save a local family from eviction and raising funds to support a local homeless shelter
- Coordinated a coalition of six organizations to battle food insecurity in response to COVID
- Launched Winter Markets to support local artists and people working side jobs to make ends meet during the economic downturn

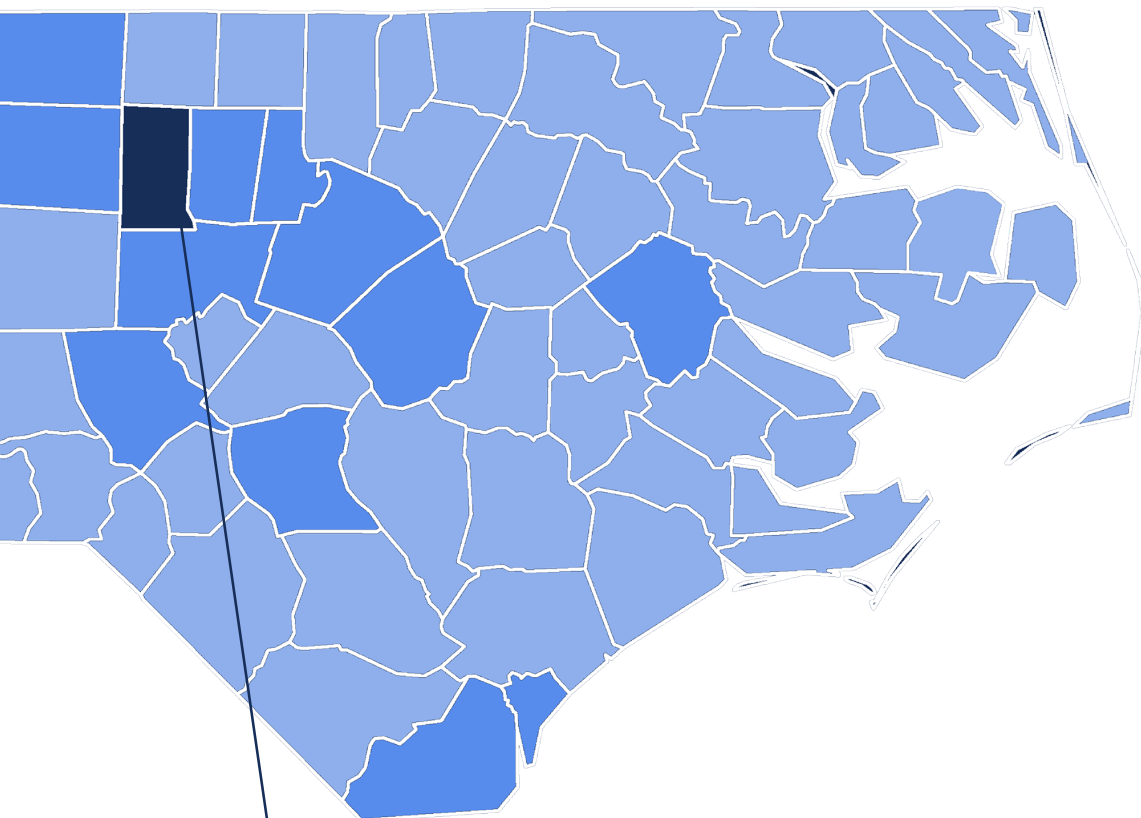
This year, Down Home Jackson members:

- Continued to certify local businesses as Living Wage Employers
- Helped 87 local families with COVID related expenses through the mutual aid fund
- Held a candidate forum in conjunction with Down Home Haywood on the overdose crisis in Western North Carolina
- Launched a Down Home student group at Western Carolina University

This year, Down Home Cabarrus members:

- Successfully launched and chartered their chapter in June 2020
- Three Down Home Cabarrus members ran for local office, and now one member is officially seated on the Cabarrus County School Board
- Organized successful Souls to the Polls and other voter turnout events that helped to increase local Democratic turnout by 76% over 2016, and Black Democratic turnout by 66%
- Created the Cabarrus Community Bail Fund to help secure the release of low-income residents from the Cabarrus County Jail





This year, Down Home Alamance members:

- Conducted a Mass Bail Out in response to the COVID19 outbreak in the county jail. In total, we raised the funds and secured the release for 38 individuals in 2020
- Three Down Home Alamance members ran powerful races for local office with significant turnout and support at the polls
- Worked with Siembra NC and other partners to host The People's Referendum, enacting a vote on the removal of the Confederate Monument and the Sheriff's 287(g) agreement with ICE when the local County Commission refused to
- Organized large poll protection efforts across the county in response to growing neo-Confederate intimidation

Down Home worked with the following statewide coalitions in 2020:

- Health Action Network
- North Carolina United for Survival and Beyond
- Team Democracy
- Southerners for Medicaid Expansion
- Vote NC

Down Home worked with key partners this year, including:

- Advance NC
- AFL-CIO
- Carolina Federation
- Carolina Jews for Justice
- Common Defense
- Equality NC
- Fayetteville PACT
- Flip NC
- Just Economics WNC
- Little Lobbyists
- Mijente
- National Domestic Workers
- NC American Civil Liberties Union
- NC Asian Americans Together
- NC Association of Educators
- NC Black Alliance
- NC Council of Churches
- NC Raise Up
- NC Survivors Union
- People's Action
- Poder NC
- RuralOrganizing.org
- Siembra NC
- Southern Vision Alliance
- Sunrise Movement NC

In 2020, Down Home's footprint continued to grow. North Carolina counties with growing Down Home engagement (over 100 local supporters) are indicated in medium blue.

BUILDING POWER: MEMBERS AS CANDIDATES

Meet some of our member-candidates below.

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Dreama Caldwell

A Down Home member, Dreama was born and raised in Alamance County. Running in 2020 for County Commissioner, Dreama garnered significant support among black voters, young voters, and first-time voters.

"I spent many years working in the community and hearing people feeling like they didn't belong, seeing people vent on Facebook. Then I had my own personal experiences with the criminal justice system, which led me into Down Home. After working with Down Home and going to meetings and direct actions, I realized that nothing was going to change if elected officials weren't willing to listen to us. So the only other thing to do was to get us here ... running for office.

Representation is not happening in Alamance County. *There has never been a black female on the county board so representation meant something here. We had a community of people who had totally disengaged from the political process. It was very exciting to see emergent leaders and emerging groups in the county; to see people take the Black Lives Matter and George Floyd movements and move them over into civic duty and to understand that these things are similar and related to each other. I was excited that Black people in Alamance County."*



Rupa Russe

Rupa, a member of Down Home Madison, ran for Madison County Commissioner this year. As a mother and committed community member, she focused on issues of deep importance to the people of her mountain home such as affordable housing and job training. Her campaign courageously spoke truth to power.

"The motivation I had for putting my hat in the race was... my concern about corruption in our local government. I myself had had some really negative experiences with our criminal justice system here in my county and I wanted to step forward to try to help address those issues. We have some issues up here in the mountains, and I thought we needed a strong mountain woman to help resolve some of them.

*I'm really grateful for the bridge-building that my campaign was able to establish and get going in this very closed environment up here in the mountains; our county has a top-down power structure locally and we were able to break open some doors that will lead to excellent conversations in the future about **how we don't have to be fearful of newcomers but can also establish the groundwork on how to respect the values and needs of folks who have been here for generations.**"*

Down Home believes in building power in North Carolina.

In the recent elections, our members interviewed and endorsed twenty-four candidates running for positions ranging from local school boards to the statehouse. Over a quarter of these candidates were also Down Home members.



Aimy Steele

A former educator and principal, Aimy is a founding member of Down Home Cabarrus. As a mother of five, she knows firsthand the challenges facing both North Carolinian schools and families. Running a competitive race for NC House 82, Aimy campaigned for meaningful change in both education and the life chances of everyday people.

*“I am most proud of the impact we have had on people who were watching the race, who were hopeful, who were motivated to do other things as a result of my race. Inspiring hope within people was truly the fringe benefit of running even if not winning. **If we don’t have hope, we have nothing-- that is the precipice by which someone starts to deteriorate.** Having hope allowed me to see that I was doing something powerful even if we weren’t successful with the vote count ... We were able to get our message out to people who have been systematically not included.*

To run for office, you have to take inventory of your life and get your own self together. This journey is so much more than just running for office, it’s a personal and professional journey and you will learn a lot about yourself. You learn a lot about what you are capable of; about your character, what you can stand, what you will stand, and what you won’t stand for.”



Keisha Sandidge

A member of Down Home Cabarrus, Keshia is a parent with a child in the local school system. Committed to bringing positive change to students, families, and teachers, Keshia successfully campaigned for, and won, an appointment to the local school board.

“I’m a parent of a special needs child in our county and I got tired of going to the Board of Education and feeling unheard. I started talking to other parents and developing relationships with teachers and there were just a number of issues occurring in our county that seemed to go unaddressed-- I got tired of it. I also got tired of being the only person of color in the room. You know, it just encouraged me that I need to be that one person to speak up and to stand up for other people of color. I wanted my daughter and kids like her to be able to look up to someone or know someone who was fighting for them that looked like them. I had no choice in the matter but to run.

*It’s been over 25 years since there has been a person of color on our board and for me to be able to go out and run and get in on the first try speaks volumes to what others can do. **Bringing people from the Latino community, the Asian community, the white community, the Black community together to ensure that we have a social worker on our board is something to be proud of.”***

SOLIDARITY, NOT CHARITY: DOWN HOME MUTUAL AID

The 2020 pandemic has laid bare the social, economic, and political crises that our communities have been bearing for decades.

When COVID19 caused North Carolina communities to shut down, Down Home members immediately faced significant and real hardship; this is because **poor and working families in the state and elsewhere have no cushion to fall back on**. According to a 2018 Federal Reserve report, nearly half of Americans can't pay an unexpected bill of \$400.00, meaning that many if not most local families could not afford to stock up on food supplies or basic sanitation supplies as they were being instructed to do this past spring.

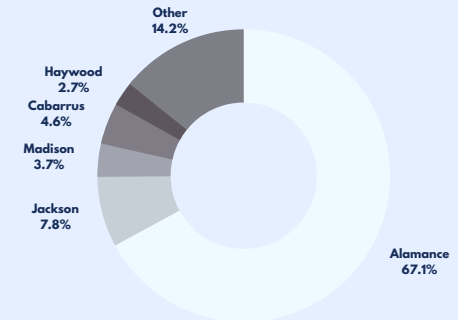
The pandemic forced Down Home to transform from in-person meetings to digital spaces, but we met the crisis in other ways too. **Within days of the shutdown, we had launched the Down Home Mutual Aid Fund to help struggling community members.**

Primarily built from member donations, our Mutual Aid Fund raised over \$55,000 to be redistributed in cash payments and, occasionally, in the form of groceries dropped off on a neighbor's porch. Our members were able to assist a range of people, from seniors laid off from part-time work who no longer could afford necessary medications, to a teenager hoping to help her mother feed her and her siblings due to school food program closures. "Being able to offer help to people without them having to fill out forms or prove to us that they qualified was so satisfying," says Debbie Smith, a Down Home Alamance member. "They couldn't believe that we believed them. But why wouldn't we? We know it's hard."

"Mutual aid is a different way of interacting with people," says Tom Tomeka of Down Home Haywood. "People helping each other, offering assistance to a neighbor, changes the power dynamics behind the help. It acknowledges that we all need help and that we can all give. **This is about solidarity, not charity.**"

We are now nine months into the coronavirus pandemic and currently facing a deadly "third wave" of infections. Meanwhile, rural North Carolinians continue to wait for a coordinated response to the pandemic that would offer real assistance to working people from the state and federal governments. Down Home's Mutual Aid Fund offered a strong contrast of care that features communal support. Our members are using this model of organizing to build collective power. This power can be used to create lasting political and structural change; to stop evictions and secure affordable housing, to protect essential workers, and ultimately, to demand that North Carolina's failing unemployment system be rebuilt to support families. Our lives depend on it.

ABOUT THE FUND



Over 600 families helped through the fund



Fund recipients who heard about it through friends, family, or neighbors and were new to Down Home's organizing

Our fund was able to help in other ways, too.



Contributed to the Southern Alamance Family Empowerment food ministry as demand increased



Helped a family in Haywood facing foreclosure by hosting fundraisers and paying their mortgage off



Covered a week of expenses for the Open Door Shelter after COVID-19 expanded local need in Western NC



Contributed to Rural Organizing and Resilience in Madison County to help support their food relief efforts as the pandemic hit

RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST: DOWN HOME'S RELATIONAL VOTER TURNOUT PROJECT

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At Down Home, we know that rural voters determine elections in North Carolina. But how do we mobilize people who live on farms, gravel roads, and in unincorporated communities to vote?

“There are so many hard-to-reach people. Only 5% of people answer their phone, 15-30% answer the door. Some campaigns reach the same people every year,” explains Down Home’s Gayle Schwartzberg. “Door knocking and canvassing will always be our bread and butter. But we knew we had to do more.”

This year, Down Home launched an ambitious Relational Voter Turnout project to take us out of that bubble. RVT harkens back to the ways our grandparents did things: **Chatting at the post office or diner with people we know and who already trust us.**

We equipped over 800 rural North Carolinians with the skills and tools they needed to engage their friends, neighbors, and families in voting. These leaders logged over 11,000 conversations in addition to using creative strategies such as mailing handwritten cards, visiting Black-owned businesses, and hosting hangouts over social media.

“These conversations were more impactful than a conversation with a stranger,” says Gayle, pointing out that 75% of the people contacted through the program returned their ballots before election day.

Every county where Down Home organizes saw dramatic increases in voter turnout over 2016, especially in our Piedmont counties where Democratic voter turnout, and in particular Black Democratic turnout, far exceeded state averages. Conversation by conversation, we know that our RVT efforts helped decide close elections and sent historic candidates like Ricky Hurtado to the State House.



Photos of Down Home in action across rural North Carolina. Car demonstration photo taken by Joshua Joseph Lynch.

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Everything that you do, have a connection with your heart. Bring it back to humanity.

- Sugelema Lynch, Alamance County Organizer

CAPTAIN JACKS *Mountain View*

