WASHINGTON — In his bid to become North Carolina’s first Black governor, Republican Mark Robinson assails government safety net spending as a “plantation of welfare and victimhood” that has mired generations of Black people in “dependency” and poverty.

But the firebrand lieutenant governor’s political rise wouldn’t have been possible without it.

Over the past decade, Robinson’s household has relied on income from Balanced Nutrition Inc., a nonprofit founded by his wife, Yolanda Hill, that administered a free lunch program for North Carolina children. The organization, funded entirely by taxpayers, has collected roughly $7 million in government funding since 2017, while paying out at least $830,000 in salaries to Hill, Robinson and other members of their family, tax filings and state documents show.

The income offered the Robinsons a new degree of stability after decades of struggle that included multiple bankruptcies, home foreclosure and misdemeanor charges — later dropped — for writing bad checks. In Robinson’s telling, the financial turnaround provided by the organization also allowed for his ascent into the North Carolina government.

“Yolanda’s nonprofit was providing a salary for her that was enough to support us,” Robinson wrote in his 2022 memoir, noting that its growth gave him the freedom to quit his furniture manufacturing job in 2018 and begin a career in populist conservative ***politics***.

“I either was making speeches or was downtown at my wife’s office, helping her with her work,” he wrote of juggling his early political activity with Balanced Nutrition, which records indicate paid him about $40,000 in 2018. “When I ran for office, I stopped doing that. ... Now my son does it.”

Yet now in the closing months of a swing-state campaign, the nonprofit that provided the family a vital lifeline has also become a political liability. In March, state regulators launched a probe of the organization’s finances after flagging years of bookkeeping irregularities, including over $100,000 in unaccounted spending.

The scrutiny adds to Robinson’s challenges. He already has drawn negative attention for his history of inflammatory comments that include calling former first lady Michelle Obama a man and using the word “filth” when discussing gay and transgender people.

Robinson, who would oversee a state budget of more than $30 billion if elected governor, has denied any wrongdoing and blasted the inquiry as politically motivated. His campaign declined to make Robinson or any of his family members available for an interview. But campaign spokesman Michael Lonergan defended Balance Nutrition’s work, citing other state audits separate from the current inquiry.

“Lt. Gov. Robinson is proud of the work his wife has done to help needy children get nutritious meals,” Lonergan said. “Democrats are weaponizing bureaucracy against the family of their political opponents.”

**PERSONAL STRUGGLES**

Robinson often speaks of struggle and redemption, setting himself apart from career politicians and wealthy influencers in Raleigh. This compelling autobiography, combined with Robinson’s brash talk, has endeared him to supporters of Donald Trump, who endorsed Robinson at a March rally. The presumptive Republican presidential nominee often refers to Robinson as “Martin Luther King on steroids.”

“I grew up poor,” Robinson says frequently, detailing his childhood as the son of an alcoholic father who died when he was in elementary school. He recounts that he “lost my car, my home,” was “forced into bankruptcy,” and “lost my job not once but twice.”

“Like you, I don’t need a politician to tell me what to be worried about,” he says, noting the “gnawing feeling” of money woes.

Indeed, from the 1990s until recent years, Robinson and Hill endured extended financial struggles, but one that is more complicated than what he usually tells voters.

The couple declared bankruptcy three times from 1998 to 2003 and failed to file federal income taxes for five years until compelled to do so during bankruptcy proceedings.

They have left behind a trail of aggrieved creditors, including the Girl Scouts, court documents show. Among them was a former landlord whose wife was dying of cancer when the Robinsons shorted him $2,000 in rent, according to local news accounts and documents from a 2012 case.

A bankruptcy judge rejected their 2003 bankruptcy case after the Robinsons failed to make payments to their creditors that they had agreed to in court. The case ended with Robinson and Hill having paid about $9,000 on about $71,000 in debt payments negotiated in bankruptcy court.

Lonergan called the bankruptcies “old news” that only proves Robinson has “lived the struggles” of many North Carolinians.