

# [***GOP candidate for NC governor blasts public spending as his family nonprofit rakes in taxpayer funds***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C34-6441-JC5B-G3BM-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — In his bid to become North Carolina’s first Black governor, Republican [*Mark Robinson*](https://apnews.com/hub/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*](https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-election-governor-primaries-180dd949d31c7e26a50bc5947de3d6e7) 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*](https://apnews.com/hub/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 financial 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 him or any of his family members available for an interview. But campaign spokesman Michael Lonergan defended Balance Nutrition's work, citing a routine audit that did not find any “material weaknesses" in the organization's 2021 finances.

“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, the state capital. This compelling autobiography, combined with Robinson's brash talk, has endeared him to supporters of [*Donald Trump*](https://apnews.com/hub/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.

**A NONPROFIT TO FEED CHILDREN**

Hill founded her nonprofit in 2015 and soon gained approval to administer a joint state and federal program that reimburses day cares for feeding low-income children. The program requires detailed records of operations and spending.

Starting in 2020, state officials noticed problems with Balanced Nutrition’s paperwork and nearly placed the organization on the Department of Health and Human Services “seriously deficient” list. A major issue, according to government emails obtained by The Associated Press, was a lack of documentation: missing menus, timesheets, prior approval for some expenses and confirmation of income eligibility for children receiving aid.

Another issue flagged in those emails: $134,729.23 in spending from last year that was not explained in documents Hill submitted to the state as part of annually required paperwork. As state regulators ramped up scrutiny, Hill moved in April to shutter her nonprofit while suggesting that state officials were pursuing "some type of vendetta, be it personal or political,” according to her email correspondence.

Documented clearly, though, is a series of raises Hill gave herself with the blessing of a Balanced Nutrition board that included her family members.

Though the organization had an inauspicious start, by 2022 its budget topped $1.7 million, tax filings show. By 2023, Hill earned $150,000 a year, according to state documents. Some of her raises coincided with Balanced Nutrition receiving additional government pandemic aid, including a $150,000 grant in 2023 that was made possible through the American Rescue Plan — signature legislation signed into law by President [*Joe Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden). On the same day she disclosed receiving the grant, Hill submitted paperwork giving herself a $10,000 raise, according to a revised budget for Balanced Nutrition that was submitted to the state.

Hill also took a $28,000 raise in 2020 that coincided with about $57,000 in federal loans through the Paycheck Protection Program, intended to help businesses struggling with lost revenue during the pandemic. The loans, which were later forgiven, were previously reported by The Assembly, a North Carolina news site. Balanced Nutrition received $45,000 in minority women in business grants between 2022 and 2023, according to state documents.

Records also show a $5,600-a-year raise given to the couple’s son in 2023 for his part-time work, while their daughter was paid $83,000 that year. The Robinson's children, who are both adults, did not respond to requests for comment.

Robinson himself appears to have been paid through the nonprofit in 2018, as previously reported by The Daily Haymaker, a conservative North Carolina website. State records show he was slated to earn $42,000, though the organization did not report paying him on their tax filing that year, and he did not report making income from the organization on financial disclosure forms he filed as a candidate for lieutenant governor.

As Balanced Nutrition grew, Robinson campaigned for statewide office as a staunch fiscal conservative who criticized the government as too big and costly, especially with liberals in charge.

“The Democratic Party is the party of welfare checks and dependency. The Republican Party is the party of freedom and opportunity,” Robinson wrote in his memoir.

In 2021, after he won statewide office and started drawing a public salary that is now $157,000 a year, Balanced Nutrition stopped reporting specific compensation information for members of Robinson's family on its annual tax forms. The Internal Revenue Service requires such figures to be provided. Instead, the documents show Hill and their son earning $0 – submissions that are at odds with figures the nonprofit provided on state filings.

The campaign pointed to a separate, routine audit for the 2021 calendar year in which an independent firm “did not identify any deficiencies in (Balanced Nutrition's) internal control that we consider to be material weaknesses.”

Lonergan said that suggests “Democrats are just moving the goalposts” with the current inquiry.

The independent firm, however, noted that its audit was not the same as additional reviews by the state agencies that issue grants and then closely assess how that money is spent.

Balanced Nutrition's accounting irregularities are not the only aspect of the Robinsons' finances to be scrutinized since he first sought public office.

After his 2020 campaign, Robinson drew attention to how he used campaign funds. Some expenses became the subject of a state ethics complaint that Robinson's campaign says is still pending. Among the expenses: $5,600 paid to Hill for “campaign apparel” and rental cars. Payments of $2,375 to an outdoor equipment rental company at a popular vacation lake by the Virginia border. And on the day after Christmas 2019, $2,400 in cash was withdrawn from Robinson's campaign fund without a given purpose, according to campaign finance disclosures.

North Carolina state law prohibits campaign expenses for personal or family benefits, as well as unexplained cash withdrawals over $50. Lonergan said Robinson addressed questions from the state's campaign finance regulators “almost three years ago” and has not gotten a resolution, despite pressing the agency for one. A spokesman for the agency said North Carolina law bars it from discussing inquiries related to campaign finance complaints.

There are indicators the Robinsons are again facing financial pressure as the state conducts its probe of Balanced Nutrition.

Federal and state regulations bar the nonprofit from using public funding, its sole source of revenue, for legal fees. Earlier this month, the couple took out a $96,000 line of credit on their home, according to public lending records.

In his 2022 book, Robinson is more forthright about his shortcomings than he often is as a bombastic candidate for governor. He wrote that he has searched for candidates “who have made no mistakes.”

“I haven’t found any,” he declared.

Then, he shifted to one of his favorite targets: the federal government. “Truth be told,” he wrote, “when you go to Washington, D.C., you will find people who have done way worse.”

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Barrow reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writer Gary Robertson in Raleigh, N.C., contributed to this report.

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