For the past 36 years, Sally R. Cameron has held the distinction of being the first and only executive director of the North Carolina Psychological Association (NCPA). When she took the position in 1981, the association didn’t have an office – but they did have a box of file cards.

“They had cards for all the members, and a lot of them hadn’t paid dues in many years,” she recalls. “So if I wasn’t starting from ground zero, it was definitely ground one or two!”

From that box of file cards, she has helped grow NCPA into a robust and thriving organization of nearly a thousand members from across the state. Along the way, she’s earned a reputation as a transformational leader and brilliant advocate for practicing psychologists.

“I make sure NCPA is at every table. That way, we have a voice at every table that impacts psychology,” she says.

That ethos has put Cameron at “tables” everywhere from the state legislature to negotiations with insurance companies to meetings of the Council of Executives of State, Provincial (and Territorial) Psychological Associations, or CESPPA, where she is widely respected for her wisdom and leadership.

Cameron’s colleagues describe her in superlatives – Charles Cooper, PhD, NCPA’s director of professional affairs, called her a “phenomenon” – but Cameron is humble when reflecting on her accomplishments. She emphasizes not what she’s done, but what motivates her to do it.

“One reason I’ve loved working with NCPA is that the second most important thing, and sometimes the most important thing, is advocating for the people psychologists serve,” she says. “In this role, I can do both: care about the profession and about the people, too.”

A track record of success

In March 2017, at the Practice Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C., Cameron’s contributions and support for professional psychology were recognized with a prestigious Presidential Citation by APA President Antonio Puente, PhD.

“Ms. Cameron is an exemplar of innovation, collaborative leadership, coalition-building and genuine caring for her fellow human beings. She has been a mentor to many and collaborator to all… [Her] quiet effectiveness in demonstrating new directions for the work of state associations and APA has advanced our field,” Puente wrote in the citation.

One way to trace the evidence of this is to appreciate Cameron’s long history of organization-building.

For example, more than 25 years ago, she helped found the North Carolina Psychological Foundation, and she serves as its executive director in addition to running NCPA. She has also assembled multidisciplinary coalitions like the Joint Insurance Task Force, a team of psychologists and other mental health professionals who work on members’ reimbursement issues.

In addition, she has extended her dedication beyond North Carolina to the wider community of practicing psychologists and state associations.
“That’s one of the values of CESPPA: connections and sharing,” she says. “Having a big network keeping us informed about updates and challenges is crucial, as is the support of APA and the Practice Organization.”

Cameron is also widely regarded as a seasoned advocate who already had nearly a decade of lobbying and advocacy experience before she came on board at NCPA.

“Ms. Cameron is respected throughout the state for her expertise in public policy surrounding professional practice and behavioral health services,” Puente wrote. “Her reputation among state officials and legislators is impeccable, and she is trusted to give them the straight story.”

A registered lobbyist, Cameron has had a hand in passing strong scope-of-practice and mental health parity laws in North Carolina; getting psychologists recognized as primary care providers in the state health plan; and enrolling psychologists as Medicaid providers, among other successes.

More recently, she helped strategize NCPA’s opposition to North Carolina House Bill 2 (also known as HB2 or the “bathroom bill”).

“I’m so proud of our leadership,” Cameron says of NCPA’s support of protections for transgender people in the state. “We took a stand. Our response was based on research, but we were thoughtful about it and unafraid to speak up.”

It’s clear that Cameron views her role as just one link in a strong, interdependent chain made up of NCPA’s board, volunteers, members, the network of state associations and – critically – the public.

“I feel very fortunate to have staff, members and leadership who care about their profession and give an amazing amount of time to it,” she says. “I love the variety of this work, and that I’m part of an organization that allows me to advocate for things that don’t necessarily just put dollars in psychologists’ pockets, but also helps the people they serve.”