



Looking to sharpen your computer-assisted reporting skills? Want to learn new ways to obtain and display data on the Web? Just a beginner and looking to learn more?

Then come to Indianapolis in March for IRE and NICAR's 2009 CAR Conference. Four days of panels and hands-on classes will give you the tools you need to stay ahead of the competition online, in print and on the air.

We'll offer everything from cutting-edge technology to the basics on using spreadsheets, databases and online mapping. Learn from the best in panel discussions and during hands-on training sessions. And we're bringing back our advanced Web frameworks mini-bootcamp, which teaches you how to create and customize interactive databases for your Web site.

So come to The Sheraton Indianapolis City Centre on March 19-22. For registration and more information, go to [www.ire.org/training](http://www.ire.org/training).

# Save the Date!

The annual  
IRE Conference  
is coming to  
Baltimore  
June 11-14.



# THE IRE JOURNAL

## TABLE OF CONTENTS JULY/AUGUST 2008

4	<b>STRENGTH OF CONVICTION</b> By Mark Horvit IRE Executive Director
6	<b>BUDGET 2009</b> By Mark Horvit IRE Executive Director
10	<b>DANGEROUS BUSINESS</b> Paper's investigation examined reports of poultry workers' injuries being ignored By Ames Alexander, Kerry Hall and Franco Ordoñez <i>The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer</i>
13	<b>Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis</b> By Steve Weinberg <i>The IRE Journal</i>

**14-27** SMALL STAFF, BIG RESULTS

**15** KEYS TO SUCCESS: PLANNING, DESIRE, COMMITMENT  
By Doug Pardue  
*The (Charleston, S.C.) Post and Courier*

**16** FAMILY TIES  
Affordable housing wound up in the wrong hands  
By AmyJo Brown

**20** FOLLOWING THE TRAIL  
Stories shed light on a rural prostitution ring  
By Lyle Muller  
*The (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) Gazette*

**24** ROAD HAZARDS  
Series examines the toll taken by those who drive with suspended licenses  
By Kevin Wack and Andrew Russell  
*Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram*

**27** SMALL NEWSROOM RESOURCES  
By Tori Moss  
*The IRE Journal*



### ABOUT THE COVER

Doing enterprise and investigative work in any situation can be challenging. Finding the time and resources is even tougher in smaller newsrooms. Check out some of the success stories beginning on Page 14.

Photo illustration by Wendy Gray, *The IRE Journal*

### Cover stories:

Pages 14-27

28	<b>ANALYSIS QUANTIFIES SOCIAL PROMOTION</b> By Jack Gillum <i>Arizona Daily Star (Tucson)</i>
32	<b>TRACKING AID FOR STORM SURVIVORS</b> Supplies meant for Katrina victims instead sold as surplus By Abbie Boudreau and Scott Zamost CNN Special Investigations Unit

MANAGING EDITOR &  
PUBLICATIONS COORDINATOR  
Megan Means

ART DIRECTOR  
Wendy Gray

SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR  
Steve Weinberg

CONTRIBUTING LEGAL EDITOR  
David Smallman

STORY EDITOR  
Joanna Imm

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE  
Tori Moss

---

**IRE**

IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
Mark Horvit

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

PRESIDENT

Cheryl Phillips, *The Seattle Times*

VICE PRESIDENT

Alison Young, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

TREASURER

Lea Thompson

SECRETARY

Duff Wilson, *The New York Times*

Manny Garcia, *The Miami Herald*

James V. Grimaldi, *The Washington Post*

Jason Grotto, *Chicago Tribune*

Stephen C. Miller, *freelance reporter/editor*

Lise Olsen, *Houston Chronicle*

Marilyn Thompson, *The Washington Post*

Mc Nelly Torres, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*

Lawan Williams, KSHB-Kansas City, Mo.

Phil Williams, WTVF-Nashville

---

The IRE Journal (ISSN0164-7016) is published six times a year by Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211, 573-882-2042. E-mail: journal@ire.org. U.S. subscriptions are \$70 for individuals, \$85 for libraries and \$125 for institutions/businesses. International subscriptions are \$90 for individuals and \$150 for all others. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, Mo. Postmaster: Please send address changes to IRE. USPS #451-670

© 2008 Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.

## Strength of conviction

BY MARK HORVIT  
IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every reporter who has worked for a small news organization knows the drill: If you want to do enterprise work, then you better be creative, hard working and pretty adept at juggling.

That experience is becoming all the more common in these days of the shrinking newsroom. Even newspapers with hefty circulation numbers and major metropolitan areas to cover are scrambling to find ways to make do with less: fewer reporters, smaller budgets, tighter newsholes. And the same is true for broadcasters.

But every reporter who has worked for a small to midsize news organization also knows this: The best journalists find a way to do great work.

This edition of the *Journal* puts the spotlight on several smaller newsrooms that have tackled big projects.

There are many such examples. The IRE Awards include categories for newspapers with circulations below 100,000, local weeklies and broadcasters from small markets. And the entries we get are impressive.

Take this year's winner in the under-100,000 circulation category. Sandy Hodson, courts reporter for *The Augusta Chronicle* in Georgia, learned of a couple of cases in which men who had been convicted of serious crimes had never had their appeals heard. She started digging in, deciding to review five years of convictions to see if a pattern emerged.

It did. So she tackled another five years. Her work ultimately showed that more than 100 people who had been sentenced to more than five years in prison never had their day in appeals court. Some died waiting.

Researching and reporting the story were huge tasks. And, as one of eight metro reporters, she had to do the work while continuing to cover her beat. Her editor was supportive, but resources were tight.

"If I had a few minutes here or an hour there, or an afternoon, I'd just plug away on it," she says.

That process took the better part of a year. Hodson wanted to drive to a prison in southern Georgia and meet face-to-face with some of the convicted, but said she ended up having to do those interviews by phone.

"That was kind of a kick in the teeth," she acknowledges. But she quietly went about finishing the project.

Hodson's efforts were worth it. As a result of her story "The Wait of Conviction," judges began scheduling appeals for the inmates who had been waiting. In some cases, convictions were overturned, and the process continues to this day.

Her experience is hardly unique. In the articles in this month's *Journal*, you'll hear from reporters and editors who made time for enterprise work despite small staffs and limited budgets. One reporter exposed a housing scandal while fulfilling a daily story quota.

The resulting stories exposed wrongdoing, engaged readers, brought increased attention to the news organizations and, most importantly, helped them fulfill the crucial watchdog role that is imperiled whenever a news organization's resources are spread thin.

IRE has an ongoing training program designed to help such journalists. Our Watchdog Workshop program has taught investigative techniques to several thousand reporters and editors – most of them not on full-time projects desks – thanks to support from a number of sponsors through the years, including ongoing backing from the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation and the *Las Vegas Sun*, published by Barbara J. Greenspun.

The kind of dedication we see in the reporters who come through our workshops, and whose work we're highlighting this month, is a worthy reminder that, in the end, the most important resource for doing investigative work is an impassioned journalist.

"If you love doing this work," Hodson says, "you find the time."

---

Mark Horvit is executive director of IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. He can be reached through e-mail at mhorvit@ire.org or by calling 573-882-2042.

## IRE announces new training directors

IRE has expanded its training operations.

We now have two training directors, a change that will allow our organization to focus more attention on key areas including developing new training initiatives and developing an online training program.

Joining IRE this month is Doug Haddix, who comes to the organization from *The Columbus Dispatch* in Ohio, where he worked as projects editor since 1998. Investigations he supervised included an examination of Ohio's flawed DNA testing system for inmates claiming innocence, mortgage fraud and the growing global market for counterfeit goods. Doug, who has also worked in Scranton, Penn., and Danville, Ill., has been a volunteer trainer for IRE for several years.



Doug Haddix

Joining IRE in October is Jaimi Dowdell. Jaimi comes to IRE from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, where she was computer-assisted reporting editor. She helped uncover waste and mispending in a local school district, reported stories that encour-

aged dam safety reform across Missouri and revealed stark disparities in local hospitals' handling of ambulance diversions—some of which put lives at risk. Jaimi worked at IRE and NICAR while completing a master's degree at the University of Missouri.



Jaimi Dowdell

Doug and Jaimi will share on-the-road training duties. Doug will also take a lead role in editing *The IRE Journal*, while Jaimi will lead the development of our online training.

IRE's former training director, David Donald, is now the database editor at the Center of Public Integrity.

## Database Library opens online store

Data purchases from the NICAR Database Library can now be made online for most data sets.

The new online store can be found via links on our main site at [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org), or you can go directly to <http://data.nicar.org>.

To enforce the long-standing policy of only allowing journalists who are IRE Members to purchase data from the library, the online store requires visitors to register for the site <http://data.nicar.org/node/79>. (It's worth the effort; you can save it for accessing new features as we continue to improve our site.)

Within 24-48 hours, IRE staff members will verify whether a registrant is an IRE Member. Members will then be able to make purchases with a credit card using our new shopping cart.

"We built this (online store) to better serve members on deadline, who need copies of NICAR's database collection immediately," said Jeremy Milarsky, Database Library director.

Data can still be purchased via phone or fax, and Milarsky said he encourages people to call the library for analysis and consultation services.

For more information, call the Database Library at 573-884-7711 or email [datalib@nicar.org](mailto:datalib@nicar.org).

## ProPublica

The staff of the recently launched investigative nonprofit ProPublica includes many IRE members. The following is a list of some of the IRE members who have recently been named as joining ProPublica:

- **Jennifer LaFleur** of *The Dallas Morning News* was named director of computer-assisted reporting.
- **Thomas Detzel** of *The (Portland) Oregonian* was named an editor.
- **Robin Fields, Charles Ornstein and Tracy Weber**, all of the *Los Angeles Times*, were named senior reporters.
- **Jake Bernstein** of *The Texas Observer*, **Sheri Fink**, **Michael Grabell** of *The Dallas Morning News*, **Christina Jewett** of the *Sacramento Bee*, **Joaquin Sapien** of the Center for Public Integrity, **Mosi Secret** of the (Durham, N.C.) *Independent Weekly* and **A.C. Thompson** were named reporters.
- **Robert Lewis, Ben Protess and Matt Schwarzfeld** are interns.

## MEMBER NEWS

**J**ohn Bowe and **Jonathan Cohn** each won the 2007 Harry Chapin Media Award in the book category. Bowe won for "Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy." Cohn won for "Sick," which explored America's faltering health care system. ■ **Keith Bradsher** and six other *New York Times* reporters won the 2008 Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment for "Choking on Growth," a 10-part series that examined the environmental impact of China's economic development. ■ **Hal Bernton** and **David Heath** of *The Seattle Times* were awarded the Clark Mollenhoff Award for Excellence in Investigative Reporting for "The Favor Factory," which exposed a system where congressional members received campaign contributions in return for securing funds for private companies. ■ **Charles Duhigg** of *The New York Times* won the 2008 Sidney Hillman Foundation Journalism Award for newspaper reporting for "Golden Opportunities," a six-part investigative series on how businesses and investors profit by scamming the elderly. ■ **Jason Grotto** and **Scott Hiaasen** won the 2007 Harry Chapin Media Award in the newspaper category for "Poverty Peddlers," a piece that investigated the financial dealings of the Miami-Dade Empowerment Trust. ■ **Chris Henao**, formerly an investigative producer at KHOU-Houston, is now the executive producer of the investigative team at KCTV-Kansas City, Mo. ■ **Kimberly Kindy**, formerly an investigative reporter with the *San Jose Mercury News*, has joined *The Washington Post* national staff as an accountability reporter focusing on the federal government and the 2008 campaign. ■ **Julie Kramer**'s "Stalking Susan," received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* and was featured as a "Sizzling Summer Read" by *People*. ■ **Ray Ring** of *High Country News* won the 2008 Sidney Hillman Foundation Journalism Award for magazine reporting for "Death in the Energy Fields."

E-mail Member News items to [Megan Means, meganm@ire.org](mailto:Megan Means, meganm@ire.org). Please include contact information for verification.

## Correction

An article in the May-June *IRE Journal* should have stated that the Arizona Project won a national award from Sigma Delta Chi.



# BUDGET 2009

BY MARK HORVIT  
IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

You don't need me to tell you that this is a tough time for our industry.

In this climate, IRE offers a conservative budget—we're predicting that income and spending will be roughly the same as it's been this year, which we finished with a small surplus.

Contributions from individual media organizations were down a bit during the past fiscal year, which ended June 30.

But generous foundations that support IRE's mission helped fill the gap.

Our 2008-09 budget calls for the continuation of our core training programs—computer-assisted reporting bootcamps, watchdog workshops, ethnic media training. We will continue to roll out new training designed to help newsrooms take advantage of the Web. And we expect the Database Library to continue to serve newsrooms at a pace equal to, or greater than, the past couple of years.

Thanks to the generosity of our members and other donors, our endowment has climbed above \$3.7 million. The interest from the endowed fund provides a steady stream of income that helps fill the gap in a tough economy.

## Proposed IRE Budget for Fiscal Year 2009 (July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009) Combined All Programs

Year	Proposed 2008	Projected 2008	Proposed 2009
<b>Membership</b>			
<b>Revenue</b>			
New membership	\$70,000	\$50,000	\$60,000
Membership-student	\$8,000	\$7,000	\$7,000
Membership-international	\$6,000	\$6,000	\$8,000
Membership renewals	\$120,000	\$118,000	\$120,000
Renewals-student	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000
Renewals-international	\$8,000	\$5,000	\$6,000
<b>Subtotal Membership</b>	<b>\$214,000</b>	<b>\$188,000</b>	<b>\$203,000</b>
Journal subscriptions	\$10,000	\$9,000	\$10,000
Journal ads	\$60,000	\$15,000	\$30,000
<b>Total Membership Revenue</b>	<b>\$284,000</b>	<b>\$212,000</b>	<b>\$243,000</b>
<b>Membership Service Expenses</b>			
IRE Journal	\$100,000	\$99,000	\$96,000
Staff costs (membership)	\$80,000	\$86,000	\$89,000
Postage and shipping	\$3,000	\$2,000	\$2,000
<b>Total Membership Service Expenses</b>	<b>\$183,000</b>	<b>\$187,000</b>	<b>\$187,000</b>
<b>Net Membership Activity</b>	<b>\$101,000</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$56,000</b>
<b>Resource Center</b>			
<b>Books</b>			
Book sales	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$58,000
Royalty revenue	\$8,000	\$10,000	\$12,000
Book costs	\$32,000	\$35,000	\$35,000
<b>Net Book Activity</b>	<b>\$26,000</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$35,000</b>
<b>Stories and Tipsheets</b>			
Resource Center story and tipsheet sales	\$8,000	\$5,000	\$8,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
Resource Center salaries and expenses	\$80,000	\$75,000	\$81,000
<b>Net Stories and Tipsheets</b>	<b>\$(42,000)</b>	<b>\$(40,000)</b>	<b>\$(43,000)</b>
<b>Contest</b>			
Award contest fees	\$26,000	\$28,000	\$30,000
Award contest expenses	\$7,000	\$10,000	\$9,000
<b>Net Award Contest Activity</b>	<b>\$19,000</b>	<b>\$18,000</b>	<b>\$21,000</b>
<b>Net Resource Center Activities</b>	<b>\$3,000</b>	<b>\$3,000</b>	<b>\$13,000</b>
<b>Web</b>			
Web services revenue	\$20,000	\$16,000	\$12,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$15,000	\$38,000	\$30,000
Web services expenses	\$45,000	\$53,000	\$50,000
<b>Net Web Services Activity</b>	<b>\$(10,000)</b>	<b>\$1,000</b>	<b>\$(8,000)</b>
<b>National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting</b>			
Database Library revenue	\$125,000	\$115,000	\$125,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Database Library salaries and expenses	\$95,000	\$90,000	\$95,000
<b>Net Database Library Activity</b>	<b>\$40,000</b>	<b>\$35,000</b>	<b>\$40,000</b>
Uplink subscription revenue	<b>\$20,000</b>	<b>\$14,000</b>	<b>\$20,000</b>
Uplink ads	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$2,000
Uplink expenses	\$8,000	\$5,000	\$6,000
<b>Net Uplink Activity</b>	<b>\$14,000</b>	<b>\$10,000</b>	<b>\$16,000</b>
<b>Net NICAR Activity</b>	<b>\$54,000</b>	<b>\$45,000</b>	<b>\$56,000</b>
Other sales and services revenue	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$2,000
Other sales and services expenses	\$10,000	\$12,000	\$12,000
<b>Net Other Sales and Services Activity</b>	<b>\$(9,000)</b>	<b>\$(11,000)</b>	<b>\$(10,000)</b>
<b>Net Sales and Services Activity</b>	<b>\$38,000</b>	<b>\$38,000</b>	<b>\$51,000</b>

<b>Proposed IRE Budget for Fiscal Year 2009 (July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009)</b>			
<b>Combined All Programs</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Proposed 2008</b>	<b>Projected 2008</b>	<b>Proposed 2009</b>
<b>Conferences and Seminars</b>			
<b>Annual Conferences</b>			
Registrations and fees (IRE and NICAR)	\$130,000	\$130,000	\$130,000
Optional CAR day	\$12,000	\$12,000	\$12,000
Other revenues	\$30,000	\$28,000	\$30,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$150,000	\$165,000	\$160,000
Total annual conference revenues	\$322,000	\$335,000	\$332,000
Conference expenses	\$195,000	\$195,000	\$195,000
<b>Net Annual Conferences Activity</b>	<b>\$127,000</b>	<b>\$140,000</b>	<b>\$137,000</b>
<b>On the Road Seminars</b>			
Registrations and fees	\$80,000	\$95,000	\$90,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$2,000	\$ -	\$2,000
Seminar expenses	\$80,000	\$90,000	\$87,000
<b>Net On the Road Seminar Activity</b>	<b>\$2,000</b>	<b>\$5,000</b>	<b>\$5,000</b>
<b>Boot Camps</b>			
Registrations and fees	\$90,000	\$60,000	\$68,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$5,000	\$7,000	\$6,000
Seminar expenses	\$30,000	\$33,000	\$25,000
<b>Net Boot Camp Activity</b>	<b>\$65,000</b>	<b>\$34,000</b>	<b>\$49,000</b>
<b>Ethnic Media Workshops</b>			
Registrations and fees	\$5,000	\$9,000	\$5,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$47,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
Workshop expenses	\$30,000	\$20,000	\$45,000
<b>Net Ethnic Media Workshop Activity</b>	<b>\$22,000</b>	<b>\$39,000</b>	<b>\$10,000</b>
<b>Watchdog Workshops</b>			
Registrations and fees	\$15,000	\$20,000	\$20,000
Prior/current year contributions released	\$70,000	\$80,000	\$80,000
Workshop expenses	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$76,000
<b>Net Watchdog Workshop Activity</b>	<b>\$35,000</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$24,000</b>
<b>Money in Politics</b>			
Registrations and fees	\$2,000	\$3,000	\$ -
Prior/current year contributions released	\$20,000	\$25,000	\$ -
Workshop expenses	\$15,000	\$16,000	\$ -
<b>Net Money in Politics Activity</b>	<b>\$7,000</b>	<b>\$12,000</b>	<b>\$ -</b>
Conference fellowships	<b>\$10,000</b>	<b>\$5,000</b>	<b>\$5,000</b>
Fellowship expenses	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$5,000
<b>Net Fellowships</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ -</b>
<b>Net Conferences and Seminar Activity</b>	<b>\$258,000</b>	<b>\$255,000</b>	<b>\$225,000</b>

<b>Proposed IRE Budget for Fiscal Year 2009 (July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009)</b>			
<b>Combined All Programs</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Proposed 2008</b>	<b>Projected 2008</b>	<b>Proposed 2009</b>
<b>Grants and Contributions</b>			
Temporarily restricted	\$150,000	\$165,000	\$175,000
Unrestricted	\$5,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Permanently restricted	\$700,000	\$715,000	\$300,000
<b>Total Grants and Contributions</b>	<b>\$855,000</b>	<b>\$890,000</b>	<b>\$485,000</b>
<b>Investment Return</b>			
Endowment investment return & dividends	\$140,000	\$130,000	\$150,000
<b>Net Program Activity</b>	<b>\$555,000</b>	<b>\$495,000</b>	<b>\$522,000</b>
<b>General and Administrative Expenses</b>			
Salary and personnel costs	\$294,000	\$270,000	\$286,000
<b>Professional Services</b>			
Consulting/fundraising	\$7,000	\$9,000	\$9,000
Accounting	\$13,000	\$15,000	\$14,000
Marketing	\$ -	\$ -	\$10,000
Legal	\$5,000	\$7,000	\$5,000
<b>Total Professional Services</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$31,000</b>	<b>\$38,000</b>
<b>General Office Expenses</b>			
Telephone and fax	\$9,000	\$8,000	\$8,000
Postage	\$7,000	\$6,000	\$7,000
Office supplies	\$7,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
Photocopying	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000
Insurance	\$15,000	\$17,000	\$17,000
Computer supplies	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$2,000
Equipment expense	\$3,000	\$5,000	\$10,000
Other office expense	\$6,000	\$12,000	\$6,000
<b>Total General Office Expense</b>	<b>\$52,000</b>	<b>\$62,000</b>	<b>\$63,000</b>
<b>Other Expenses</b>			
Publications/Dues	\$3,000	\$2,000	\$2,000
Board of Directors	\$8,000	\$12,000	\$10,000
Office Travel	\$3,000	\$9,000	\$3,000
Computer purchases	\$15,000	\$8,000	\$15,000
Staff Training	\$2,000		\$2,000
<b>Total Other Expenses</b>	<b>\$31,000</b>	<b>\$31,000</b>	<b>\$32,000</b>
<b>Total General and Administrative Expenses</b>	<b>\$402,000</b>	<b>\$394,000</b>	<b>\$419,000</b>
<b>Fundraising Expenses</b>			
Salary and expenses	\$60,000	\$65,000	\$70,000
Promotions	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$3,000
<b>Total Fund-raising Expenses</b>	<b>\$63,000</b>	<b>\$71,000</b>	<b>\$73,000</b>
<b>Depreciation</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>
<b>Quick Reserve Fund</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ -</b>
<b>Total Administrative Expenses</b>	<b>\$505,000</b>	<b>\$480,000</b>	<b>\$507,000</b>
<b>Excess Net Program Activity Over Expenses</b>	<b>\$50,000</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>

## Salaries and Benefit For Year Ending 2009

	Salary	Benefits	Total	Contributions or Allocations	
Executive Director	\$80,000	\$23,000	\$103,000	\$45,000	Journalism school/Seminars
Training Director	\$65,000	\$18,000	\$81,000	\$81,000	Seminars
Database Library Director	\$60,000	\$18,000	\$78,000	\$78,000	Database Library
Membership Coordinator	\$46,000	\$13,000	\$59,000	\$59,000	Membership
Admin Asst. Membership	\$29,000	\$9,000	\$38,000	\$28,000	Membership
System Administrator	\$42,000	\$12,000	\$54,000	\$ -	Administrative
Publications Coordinator/Advertising	\$34,000	\$10,000	\$44,000	\$44,000	Journal/Web
Resource Center Director	\$42,000	\$12,000	\$54,000	\$54,000	Endowed Post
Conference Coordinator	\$42,000	\$12,000	\$54,000	\$6,000	Seminars
Finance Officer	\$41,000	\$12,000	\$53,000	\$ -	Administrative
Program Designer	\$47,000	\$14,000	\$61,000	\$31,000	Journal
Computing Support Spec.	\$17,000	\$1,000	\$18,000	\$ -	Administrative
Development Officer	\$42,000	\$12,000	\$54,000	\$54,000	Endowment income
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$585,000</b>	<b>\$166,000</b>	<b>\$751,000</b>	<b>\$480,000</b>	Subtotal
Graduate Assistants	\$30,000		\$30,000	\$30,000	DBL/Res Ctr/Journal
Part-Time Help	\$40,000		\$40,000	\$25,000	Journal/Web
Student Web	\$10,000		\$10,000	\$10,000	Web
Student Assistants	\$35,000		\$35,000	\$35,000	Data Lib/Res Ctr
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$115,000</b>		<b>\$115,000</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>	Subtotal
<b>Total Salary/Benefits</b>				<b>\$866,000</b>	
<b>Subtotal of allocations</b>				<b>\$(580,000)</b>	
<b>Net salaries &amp; benefits</b>				<b>\$286,000</b>	Administrative/General

## IRE Quick Hits

Stay up to date with IRE and fellow members in between issues of the *Journal* with a convenient e-mail newsletter.

See the latest issue  
at [www.ire.org/quickhits](http://www.ire.org/quickhits).



An e-newsletter from Investigative Reporters and Editors • [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org)

Your connection to IRE news, resources, training and networking. Serving IRE members and those who share our commitment to investigative reporting.

**SUBSCRIPTION INFO**

**New IRE fellowship offers funds for freelancers**

A donor with longtime ties to IRE has given the organization more than \$35,000 to promote high-quality freelance investigations.

The gift will provide at least two freelance investigative journalists with at least \$1,000 apiece to conduct their projects. The original donation was matched with \$25,000 from the Challenge Fund for Journalism III — a program of the Knight, Ford, McCormick Tribune and Ethica and Excellence in Journalism Foundations — to create an \$60,000 endowed fund.

The 2008 award applications will be scrutinized by three experienced freelance journalists. Applications will be accepted until April 30, 2008, and winners will be announced at the 2008 IRE Conference in Miami. [More information.](#)

**Knight Foundation extends matching grant for IRE Endowment Fund**

IRE's endowment drive received a tremendous boost recently when the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation offered to extend its matching program through Sept. 30.

Feb. 29, 2008

**Milarsky named Database Library director**

We're happy to announce that IRE and NCAR have a new database library director.

Jeremy Milarsky, a former reporter and database editor with the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, begins his tenure at the 2008 CAR Conference in Houston this week.

Much of his career was spent at the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, where he worked as a reporter, news researcher and finally as a manager in the newsroom library. He has also worked for Tribune Interactive. Most recently, Milarsky took a short hiatus from journalism to concentrate on Web programming.

His Web skills will be a strong addition for IRE. But his main focus will be on continuing to build the Database Library, while making its collection of government data more accessible to members on deadline.

Working with data to find interesting stories, and discovering new and different ways of telling them, is his passion.

"The IRE and NCAR Database Library plays an important part in the organization's key role in serving the news media in an essential way—providing information and the means to analyze it intelligently," Milarsky said. "As news organizations continue to adapt to the changing economy, I believe the library will play an even more important service role for journalists."

Milarsky will initially be based in Florida until he can permanently relocate to the IRE headquarters in Columbia, Mo. He can be reached at [jeremy@ire.org](mailto:jeremy@ire.org).

—IRE Staff

Earn an MA at All's School of Communication.

Pursue projects at the Center.

**INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM FELLOWSHIP**

Applications due March 15







The *Observer* team wanted to find out how reported injury rates could be dropping in an industry where working conditions include repetitive cutting, dangerous equipment and toxic chemicals, to name just a few hazards.

# DANGEROUS BUSINESS

## Investigation examined reports of poultry workers' injuries being ignored

BY AMES ALEXANDER, KERRY HALL AND FRANCO ORDOÑEZ  
THE CHARLOTTE (N.C.) OBSERVER

**S** eferino Guadalupe was driving a forklift when he shattered his ankle on the job. His employer, a large North Carolina poultry company, was required to record that injury on logs that the government uses to gauge plant safety. But it didn't.

In fact, scores of the more than 200 poultry workers the *Observer* interviewed spoke of injuries or debilitating pain that their employers ignored.

For more than a year, *Observer* reporters interviewed poultry workers, examined records and analyzed government databases as part of an extensive investigation into the human cost of bringing chicken

and turkey to America's dinner tables.

In its six-part series, the newspaper told the stories of workers who reported being ignored or fired after getting hurt on the job, workers who said they couldn't get the medical care they needed and workers who said they were brought back to the factory hours after surgery.

The stories triggered state and federal investigations, new legislation and Congressional hearings focusing on workplace safety and the regulators who are supposed to enforce it.

Our investigation also demonstrated the value of

using shoe-leather reporting to check the information gleaned from documents and vice versa.

Our interest in the poultry industry began in 2005 when we were reporting a daily story about the bird flu. Reporter Kerry Hall heard how North Carolina was working to prepare the public. The state agriculture department and local poultry companies explained measures being taken to protect flocks and consumers. When Hall asked what was being done to educate or prepare workers, no one had an answer.

Poultry workers, meanwhile, told reporter Franco Ordoñez about difficult working conditions. Some said they were injured on the job but were told to keep working.

Hall and deputy business editor Mitch Weiss wondered if there was more to the story. They questioned whether regulators were adequately watching out for poultry workers. They decided to take a closer look. Investigative reporter Ames Alexander joined the project in spring 2006, and Ordoñez returned to the team that summer.

We learned early on that this was a dangerous industry. Workers with sharp knives stand shoulder to

shoulder on floors slick with chicken grease. They're surrounded by dangerous chemicals and machines. And they routinely make more than 20,000 slicing motions a day, conditions that make them vulnerable to cuts and repetitive motion injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome.

But the government's official injury statistics—based on data reported by companies—gave little sense of the dangers. Despite an increase in demand for labor-intensive specialty cuts, injury rates in the poultry industry have plummeted in recent years. Figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest workers in toy stores and pharmacies are more likely to develop musculoskeletal disorders than those in poultry plants—which workplace safety experts told us was inconceivable.

Academics and workplace safety experts suspected that companies weren't reporting many on-the-job injuries. Companies have a financial incentive to hide injuries. Ignoring them lowers costs associated with compensating workers for medical care and lost wages.

Low injury rates can also help managers win four-figure bonuses. And they can help plants avoid scrutiny from workplace safety regulators.

So we challenged ourselves to answer a few key questions: How often were poultry workers really getting hurt on the job? What was happening to them

John D. Simmons | The Charlotte Observer



The *Observer* interviewed more than 200 workers for the story. Some shared personal records of serious injuries to help document holes in poultry plants' workplace safety reports.

after they got hurt? Were they winding up on the injury logs, and if not, why not?

We collected thousands of pages of documents—including the rarely examined injury logs that companies must keep for regulators. The versions

we got from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration had the names of workers redacted. But from other sources, we managed to get many un-redacted copies.

After filing more than four dozen requests under

## FROM THE IRE RESOURCE CENTER

Learn more about worker safety issues with the IRE Resource Center. Copies of tipsheets and stories are available by calling the Resource Center at 573-882-3364 or e-mailing [rescntr@ire.org](mailto:rescntr@ire.org).

### Tipsheets

The following tipsheets provide guidance when pursuing stories related to worker safety, including the difficulties that come with investigating abuses of undocumented workers.

- **No. 1862:** "Death on the Job," Thomas Maier, *Newsday*. Maier's tipsheet addresses the difficulties of covering the working conditions of illegal immigrants in the U.S. Since these workers are undocumented, you have to dig to find the information you need. Maier points reporters in the right direction for data and information on illegal immigrants who die on the job.
- **No. 2113:** "Reporting/Writing about work place deaths," Justin Pritchard, *The Associated Press*. Pritchard gives tips for reporting on worker safety and lists government databases that can be used for analysis in these types of investigations. He also suggests ideas for the types of resources that can be used for such stories.
- **No. 2458:** "OSHA/Workplace Tipsheet," Barbara Clements, Daniel Wickert, *The News Tribune* (Tacoma, Wash.) This tipsheet aids in investigations involving OSHA data, providing tips so you won't be overwhelmed. It includes advice about examining data, as well as suggestions for making the data more manageable. Also included is a list of Web resources that may be helpful when working on an OSHA project.
- **No. 2140:** "Using data to uncover workplace dangers and abuses," Christine Stapleton, *The Palm Beach Post*. Stapleton provides extensive information

on the data available from various agencies to cover the topic of workplace safety. Additionally, she lists resources from the U.S. Department of Labor and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health Web sites that include listings of their available statistics and data sets.

- **No. 3130:** "Job safety: Getting and making sense of the data," Ames Alexander, *The Charlotte* (N.C.) *Observer*. Alexander lists and describes sources for workplace safety information, such as OSHA and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. He also offers tips for working with these information sources.

### Stories

The following investigations explore issues of workplace safety and undocumented workers:

- **Story No. 22535:** "The Pineros Men of the Pines." This series of stories uncovered the extensive mistreatment and abuse of Latino workers who plant and thin federal and private forests. Like immigrant farm workers before them, the pineros had largely toiled in obscurity with scant recognition of their existence. Tom Knudson, Hector Amezcua, Seth Van Booven, *The Sacramento Bee* (2005)
- **Story No. 20707:** "On the Job of Last Resort." This investigation by the *Omaha World-Herald* uncovered how the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was providing minimal oversight for the contractors who clean up meatpacking houses every night. The *World-Herald* found that "most of these contractors are undocumented workers, and that their cleaning is every bit as dangerous as day-time meatpacking." In fact, their injury rate was four times higher than normal workers in the industry. Seth Jordan, Jeremy Olson, Cindy Gonzalez, *Omaha World-Herald* (2003)



OSHA rule changes have made it harder to identify patterns of musculoskeletal injuries, providing less protection for poultry workers who routinely make more than 20,000 cutting motions per day.

the Freedom of Information Act, we got records detailing OSHA inspections of poultry plants nationwide, as well as documents with information about workers' compensation cases and ambulance runs to poultry plants.

In 2006, we began visiting communities surrounding poultry plants, where we talked with scores of workers—many of them Latino, undocumented and reluctant to complain for fear of being fired or deported. Most were afraid to speak out, initially unwilling to draw attention to themselves or their immigration status. It took weeks, in some cases months, to establish ties and develop sound enough relationships with workers who later opened up to *Observer* reporters about the sacrifices they made to provide for their families.

We wound up talking to more than 200 current and former poultry workers in the Southeast, and most of them said they had suffered on-the-job injuries. Where possible, we obtained independent confirmation of a worker's injury—including medical bills, prescriptions and X-rays.

Things got interesting when we compared what workers told us with the official injury logs kept by companies. Time and again, we spoke with injured workers whose names didn't show up on the logs.

Companies generally aren't required to report injuries unless they result in medical care beyond first aid or time off work. But many seriously injured workers told us the company blocked their path to a doctor's office. Some said their supervisors wouldn't let them leave the production line to visit a company nurse. Others said company nurses refused to send them to a doctor, instead giving them painkillers and bandages before sending them back to the line.

Still others did get medical care but still weren't

showing up on company injury logs. Guadalupe, for instance, underwent surgery to repair his ankle after it was shattered at a House of Raeford plant in North Carolina. His name didn't appear on the company's logs. The company's safety director said he couldn't explain why the accident wasn't listed and called it an isolated case.

Repeated visits to a number of former company officials gave us a more detailed picture. For instance, one former employment supervisor at a House of Raeford plant told us how the company preferred to employ undocumented workers because managers could more easily control them. She said she urged plant managers to send injured workers to a doctor but they often refused—and told her that if workers kept coming to the nurse's office, they would be fired.

"You complain and you become unemployed," she told us.

A former plant medical director, meanwhile, relayed how a manager asked her why she was sending so many workers to the doctor—and told her that it was her job to keep them from going to the doctor.

OSHA, we discovered, was doing little to combat these problems. Weak enforcement, minimal fines and declining scrutiny have allowed companies to ignore hazards that can kill and injure workers. Though the industry's workforce has remained fairly steady over the past decade, the number of OSHA inspections at poultry plants has plummeted. OSHA officials contend fewer inspections are necessary, pointing to the declining injury rates.

But others—including a top OSHA record-keeping expert who became an instrumental source—told us they believed the rates were declining partly because the government had given up many of its efforts to combat the underreporting of workplace injuries. Today, OSHA inspectors rarely search for underreporting, and the number of citations for record-keeping violations has fallen by more than half since 1990.

Bob Whitmore, who for years has directed the national record-keeping system for the U.S. Department of Labor, told us he tried to get his bosses to look more aggressively for underreporting but his requests went nowhere.

Instead, OSHA made it easier for companies to hide injuries caused by repetitive work. The agency once required companies to record such injuries in a separate column on injury logs. But OSHA, under pressure from industry, removed the column in 2002—making it harder for inspectors to look for trends.

We also found that OSHA had all but abandoned efforts to crack down on companies where working conditions were causing musculoskeletal disorders.

The project reinforced some key lessons:

- There's no substitute for showing up. Some of our best interviews—including those with Whitmore, company nurses, plant managers and former supervisors—came only after we visited sources face to face.
- Read every document—and read it more than once.

Federal authorities have indicted a human resources manager who they say instructed employees to use fraudulent employment eligibility forms. Seven supervisors have pleaded guilty to using fake IDs.

The real significance of information contained in documents sometimes doesn't become clear until reporters reach the latter stages of their research, when the full picture comes into sharper focus.

- Often the best stories come not solely from the documents—or solely from the interview notes—but from a combination of the two. Workers' accounts became far more meaningful, for instance, when we compared them to what companies recorded in their official injury logs.

The reporting was labor-intensive and at times grueling. But it has paid big dividends.

In response to our stories, state and federal authorities have begun investigating House of Raeford. Federal officials have arrested seven supervisors on immigration violations and have indicted a human resource manager who they say instructed employees to use fraudulent employment eligibility forms. North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley has spoken out against the horrible mistreatment of poultry workers, and lawmakers have agreed to beef up staffing at the state labor department.

Federal authorities have indicted a human resources manager who they say instructed employees to use fraudulent employment eligibility forms. Seven supervisors have pleaded guilty to using fake IDs.

Also, U.S. senators have asked the Government Accountability Office to examine whether OSHA is doing enough to ensure that companies honestly report workplace injuries.

And less than a week after the stories were published, federal lawmakers announced they would hold hearings to address many of the issues we raised. Said Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee: "All Americans should be horrified at the conditions reported in this investigation."

*Ames Alexander is an investigative reporter for The Charlotte Observer who has written about dangerous trends in airline maintenance, flaws in the criminal justice system and lives endangered by slow ambulance service. Kerry Hall covers the economy for the Observer. She has written about changes within the tobacco industry, mortgage fraud and the devastation that poor nursing home care brought upon families in Greensboro, N.C. Franco Ordoñez is the Observer's minority affairs reporter. He has written about lawyers taking advantage of undocumented immigrants, companies that abuse the Social Security system and the political debate between comprehensive immigration reform and greater enforcement.*

# Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

BY STEVE WEINBERG  
THE IRE JOURNAL

The virtues of longevity in covering a beat—especially when the beat involves a secretive, non-English speaking nation hostile to outside journalists—are demonstrated in a new book, “Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis.”

Mike Chinoy, longtime CNN correspondent, covered North Korea for nearly two decades and negotiated difficult entry into the country numerous times. Now he has written a chronicle of U.S.-North Korean negotiations during the Clinton and George W. Bush White House years that lives up to its billing as a “behind-the-scenes, blow-by-blow account.”

Chinoy now studies Korea as a fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy, with financial support from the Edgerton Foundation. Like many journalists, Chinoy welcomed the opportunity to step back from daily deadlines to understand the big picture in a book. He shows that Kim Jong-il is indeed a dictator who continued the repressive policies of his father. But unlike so many other journalists and foreign policy analysts, Chinoy analyzes U.S. government leaders and South Korean policymakers just as closely as he does the North Koreans (with China, Japan and other nations figuring into the mix), thus providing welcome context for North Korea’s development of a nuclear arsenal. If Kim Jong-il comes across as a villain driving an “Axis of Evil” nation (to employ the language of the Bush administration), the current President Bush is portrayed in colors just as dark. In scene after scene meticulously sourced by Chinoy (although some sources insisted on and received anonymity), Bush and his chief foreign policy advisers come across as ideologues at best, fools squandering an opportunity for nuclear disarmament at worst.

Chinoy himself does not come across as a shrill Bush administration critic so much as a journalist taking the story where the facts have led him. The irony of the situation is that the Bush administration built its foreign policy around the desire to prevent countries like North Korea from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, but failed in part because of its inability to negotiate effectively. Scenes showing the visceral personal hostility Bush developed for Kim Jong-il are especially disturbing, because Chinoy shows a U.S. president ruling via emotion instead of reason.

How did Chinoy arrive at his conclusions? By relying on an impressive range of sources. Here is a categorization, with representative examples, using Chinoy’s citation headings:

## North Korean Documentation

“With its bombast and overheated rhetoric, North Korea’s state-run media is often dismissed as meaningless propaganda,” Chinoy comments. He learned to pay attention, however. “I spent many hours poring over Pyongyang’s official pronouncements. It became increasingly clear that stripped of the verbiage, they [are] a valuable tool to understanding the thinking of the North Korean regime.” Chinoy’s “official” Korean sources are numerous. Government communiqués, newspapers and videos might be biased, but not devoid of useful content.

## U.S. Government Documentation About North Korea

The documentation comes from all branches of the U.S. government. Within the executive branch, Chinoy cites communiqués, speeches and studies from the White House, State Department and Treasury Department, among others. Within the legislative branch, Senate and House committee hearings plus Congressional Research Service studies educated Chinoy. Also cited are judicial branch rulings in international disputes. Here are a few specific examples:

Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations, unclassified report by William J. Perry, U.S.-North Korea policy coordinator and special adviser to the president and secretary of state, Washington, D.C., Oct. 12, 1999.

White House press briefing, March 20, 2002, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases).

Testimony of Charles L. Pritchard, special envoy for negotiations with the DPRK and U.S. representative to KEDO before the Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, July 26, 2001.

Congressional Research Service, North-South Korean Relations: A Chronology of Events, 2000-2001, Jan. 9, 2002.

Indictment in U.S. District Court for the Central District of California in the case United States v. Chao Tung Wu and other defendants.

## Memoirs by Diplomats and Other Insiders

Chinoy mined nuggets from book-length memoirs by Madeleine Albright, John Bolton and George Tenet, among others.

## United Nations

United Nations resolutions are not just hot air or dream weaver documents:

- U.N. Security Council Resolution 1695, posted at [www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc\\_resolutions06.htm](http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions06.htm)

## Studies Within Academia

Studies within academia might not constitute gripping reading, but the authors often have earned the appellation of expert:

- Christopher Clary, unpublished thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2003.

## Studies From Think Tanks

Studies from think tanks frequently contain original research:

- International Institute for Strategic Studies, North Korea’s Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment, 2004.
- Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Andrew Scobell, China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arms Length.

## Private or Semi-Public Speeches

Private or semi-public speeches are sometimes carefully vetted to sound non-controversial, but reveal states of mind:

- Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats From Weapons of Mass Destruction, John Bolton, at the Heritage Foundation, May 6, 2002.
- Remarks by Colin Powell at the Asia Society annual dinner, June 10, 2002.
- Statement by Christopher R. Hill, assistant secretary of state, at the Plenary of the Fourth Round of Six-Party Talks, Sept. 19, 2006.
- Remarks by Bruce Townsend at the International Association of Financial Crimes Investigators conference, Sept. 2, 2004.

## Non-English Language Material Besides North Korean

Non-English language material besides North Korean can obviously expand the horizons of journalists:

- Translation of Konstantin Pulikovskiy’s book “Orient Express: Across Russia With Kim Jong il,” 2002.
- *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, Japan
- *Hong Kong Economic Journal*

## Information From Specialized Publications and Web Sites

Information from specialized publications and Web sites sometimes turns up missing details:

- [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org)
- [www.armscontrol.org](http://www.armscontrol.org)
- *Arms Control Today* magazine
- *Naval War College Review* journal

*Steve Weinberg, a former executive director of IRE, is author of eight nonfiction books, including the just-published “Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller” (W.W. Norton).*

PLANNING

DEVELOPING MANAGEMENT TIME MANAGEMENT



# **SMALL STAFF BIG RESULTS**

**INVESTIGATING  
WITH LIMITED  
RESOURCES**

DATA CRUNCHING STORY TELLING

# KEYS TO SUCCESS: PLANNING, DESIRE, COMMITMENT

By Doug Pardue  
*The (Charleston, S.C.) Post and Courier*

**T**he *Post and Courier* lacks the staff, money and equipment that many larger newspapers have. But we're the second-largest newspaper in South Carolina, with a circulation that hovers around 100,000. As such, we have many of the regional and statewide coverage responsibilities that many medium- and small-sized local newspapers don't. That leaves us stretched to provide the necessary daily and weekend news coverage.

Still, even in this day of newsroom budget and staff slashing, in-depth and investigative reporting remains one of *The Post and Courier's* priorities. And if this past year is any indication, we've been pretty successful, winning numerous top national journalism awards.

Best of all, our projects caused change in policies and laws that made things better for people—journalism that makes a difference. This past year our work led to a complete overhaul of the city's fire department, removal of all city fees for fire sprinkler systems, a first-ever state health department study of the effects of mercury pollution on South Carolinians and adoption by the legislature of an annual program to phase out older public school buses.

A little bit of luck plays into almost every accomplishment, but much of our luck came from planning. Can any newsroom do it? Yes. It's not that hard. But it takes desire and commitment, and it helps to have the support of your top editor.

Here are some ways to make investigative reporting a regular part of your newsroom, even with a small staff and budget:

## Create a system

You need one, even if it's nothing more than one editor given the responsibility to work with reporters to hone ideas and direct reporting and writing. I-teams, although better, are not absolutely necessary as long as reporters can be pulled from daily beats to put effective effort and time into a project.

## Avoid reporting to a daily editor

The editor in charge of investigative projects should report to the managing editor or some top editor who is not directly responsible for the daily report. This places projects on an equal plane with dailies.

## Get buy-in

Each major project needs to get support from the top editors, including the editor whose reporters are involved. This helps avoid grenade throwing by those who don't support the project and it helps create involvement and team spirit.

## Mine the newsroom for potential stories

Ideas are coin of the realm, and the best ones really do come off the beat. The problem is that many of the best ideas don't float to the surface for editors to see. Reporters often hide them away. They don't want to get on the dreaded "List," which they fear may force them to turn their idea around for, say, a daily or weekender. At *The Post and Courier* we mine the newsroom by offering reporters the time and support necessary to get projects done if the editors pick their idea. This not only helps generate a steady flow of projects, but it allows the top editors to pick the stories to which they want to devote resources.

## Avoid pie-in-the-sky ideas

Investigate questions, not nouns. Look for projects that try to determine "how come" something is or isn't. As a general rule, don't launch projects until some basic research and data or records gathering has been completed, enough to give you a good sense that you can answer the question "how come?"

## Create a watchdog attitude

To win converts in your newsroom you need understanding. You've got to overcome the eternal question, "Why does investigative reporting take so

long?" You've got to show that some investigative or watchdog reporting can be as fast as a daily or a weekender. This helps build support for the big ones that do need time. It's also good to occasionally run investigations as "breaking investigative stories" in which you release findings as you find them. You also need to help others in the newsroom recognize the difference between investigative stories that get to the bottom of issues versus superficial "he said, she said" stories.

## Show that projects benefit readers

You can't do this with every project, but with many you can change laws or policies for the benefit of the public. Don't forget that many good investigative stories are forgotten without follow-ups to hold people or institutions accountable. Often this yields whole new avenues. Toot your horn with dogged follow-up reporting. If you benefit readers, you promote greater support for investigative reporting, inside and outside the newsroom.

## Team-report if possible

Despite what you've heard, all reporters are not investigative reporters. It's often best to team a strong investigative reporter with a beat or feature or other specialty reporter. This builds camaraderie and helps spread skills. Also, get people from graphics, photo and design involved at the beginning so that they are part of the project team. They can help make it sing.

## Commit to quality

Don't cut corners. Don't pull up short. Demand the best of yourself, your reporters and all of those involved in the project. Remember even the smallest newsroom can do great investigative journalism.

---

*Doug Pardue is special assignments editor for The Post and Courier.*

Don't cut corners. Don't pull up short. Demand the best of yourself, your reporters and all of those involved in the project. Remember even the smallest newsroom can do great investigative journalism.



James Black, board president of the Progressive Southeast Arkansas Housing Development Corp., could not explain financial anomalies and construction problems surrounding homes the nonprofit built using federal grants.

# FAMILY TIES

## Affordable housing wound up in the wrong hands

By AmyJo Brown

**W**ithin days of starting my job at the *Pine Bluff Commercial* as city hall reporter, I heard rumors of possible corruption within the city department that handled grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. That was in September 2007, and I decided soon after that I would make the department a mini-beat of its own within my city hall beat.

Focusing on the department in that way gave

me an opportunity to meet people and learn how the department worked while writing dailies that helped fulfill the two-byline-per-day expectation that comes with working at a small daily newspaper with a small staff. The *Commercial* has a circulation of about 17,000 and a staff of three full-time news reporters.

In May, it ran a 5,000-word investigative story revealing that more than \$500,000 in federal low

income housing funds the city awarded to Progressive Southeast Arkansas Housing Development Corp., a local nonprofit, had been misspent. Among the problems uncovered:

- Half of the six homes Progressive had built and sold for the city over the past decade went to people with incomes too high to qualify for the subsidized housing.
- One was sold to the daughter of one of the non-

Financial statements showed that Progressive continued to spend money on construction of the homes long after the homes had been sold and the new homeowners moved in.

As I learned more and began putting pieces together, I was able to get more specific in my open records requests and eventually get key information I needed, including reports documenting the homebuyers' income and household size at the time of the sale.

profit's co-founders at a deep discount.

- Progressive also spent money the city awarded it to buy property owned by the co-founder's mother.

There were also problems with how the homes were built and sold. City records didn't reflect that inspections had been done on three of the properties before they were sold. Financial statements showed that Progressive continued to spend money on construction of the homes long after the homes had been sold and the new homeowners moved in. Paperwork for the sales, including the one sold to the daughter of the co-founder, also didn't add up. In one case a second mortgage provided by the nonprofit was released a month after it was signed—even though the homeowners never made payments on it.

The investigation found city officials knew about much of Progressive's activities but continued to provide it more and more federal grant money.

After the story ran, city officials stopped doing business with the nonprofit, and they removed the head of the city department who had been overseeing the money from his position. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is investigating.

### Tip from the beat

While working on a story about HUD, I learned from a source about a homeowner who had filed a lawsuit against a nonprofit organization building houses for the city, alleging that the construction work was shoddy. At first I thought I had a fairly simple story about the lawsuit—another quick daily to turn around. But when I interviewed the homeowner I found she had documented, in great detail, her conversations with city officials about the construction of the home. She also mentioned that through the back-and-forth over the lawsuit, she had found out that she had not been qualified

to buy the home under HUD's income limits. And she said the daughter of the nonprofit's president lived next door, in one of the houses her father had built.

That was the "A-ha!" moment. I realized my story was likely to be about more than an organization building bad homes on the city's dime.

### FOI strategy

Over the next few days, I called the other homeowners to ask about their experiences buying from Progressive. But they were hesitant to talk



Homeowner Barbara Abraham sued the Progressive Southeast Arkansas Housing Development Corp. over allegations of shoddy construction.

Ralph Fitzgerald | Pine Bluff Commercial

## QUICK LOOK

**Name of the story, and when it was published:**

"A House Not in Order," May 25, 2008

**How the story got started:**

A tip from a source, whom I got to know from an earlier story I wrote on housing

**Length of time taken to report, write and edit the story:**

About five months

**Major types of documents used:**

Depositions, deeds and mortgages, closing settlement statements, offer and acceptance contracts, copies of city checks issued to the nonprofit, the nonprofit's audited financial statements, miscellaneous memos and letters in city files. Dozens of FOI requests were requested for this article. Often I was told that what I was asking for didn't exist or couldn't be found, but instead would get a stack of extra documents I hadn't known I wanted. I was also fortunate that under Arkansas' Freedom of Information laws I was able to obtain records from the nonprofit.

**Major types of human sources used:**

President of the nonprofit's board, head of the city department overseeing the grant money, the city's mayor, homeowners





with me, and I didn't know enough then about what was going on to ask the right questions.

I then began following the leads I had gotten from the homeowner who had filed the lawsuit.

I asked her attorney for copies of her deposition and the ones he had taken with the nonprofit's president of the board and various city officials—valuable records that not only contained sworn statements from many of the main players but also provided a primer on Progressive's operations and the backgrounds of many of the people involved. I also submitted requests under Arkansas' Freedom of Information Act to the city for copies of all of its contracts with Progressive regarding the construction of the homes and copies of the inspection records for all six houses.

And I began spending whatever time I could in the county courthouse, pulling and copying the deeds and mortgages for all six houses in order to confirm who owned the homes, what they paid for them and that the nonprofit had indeed sold the homes to them.

It was the start of several months of record digging. The city only rarely responded to my Freedom of Information requests with precisely what I'd asked for—it didn't exist, they said, or they couldn't find it—but often included extra documents I hadn't known I wanted. More digging begat more digging.

Fortunately I was aided by HUD, which published an online primer ([www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/training/materials/building/index.cfm](http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/training/materials/building/index.cfm)) about how the federal grant program was supposed to work—and the kind of records that the city should have. As I learned more and began putting pieces together, I was able to get more specific in my open records requests and eventually get key information I needed, including reports documenting the homebuyers' income and household size at the time of the sale.

I was also fortunate that under Arkansas law I was able to obtain records from Progressive. A provision in the law extends the open records requirements to nonprofits providing quasi-governmental services with tax dollars. Progressive received all of its funding from the city. From them I received copies of items missing from the city's files, including closing settlement statements, signed offer and acceptance letters and appraisals, which I was able

to compare against the information on the deeds and mortgages I had pulled to find oddities.

### Months of multi-tasking

In the meantime, I was having nearly daily conversations with both the head of the city department overseeing the spending of the federal grant money and the president of Progressive's board, trying to piece together how the grants worked and their roles in overseeing the spending. I taped all of the interviews and transcribed them, referencing them as I double-checked explanations against HUD's regulations.

I also stayed in touch with the homeowners, often knocking on doors when I couldn't reach them by phone. Only one homeowner—the daughter of the co-founder of the organization—refused to meet with me. One other was ill and not at home. With the rest, I went over all of the records related to their purchase of the homes and let them know what I knew about any problems I had come across.

Of course, at small newspapers, freeing reporters to work on just one project is a luxury most editors can't afford. For four months, I worked on the project while continuing to carry a regular workload. I juggled the expectation to produce and the time I needed for the project by finding dailies that were easy to turn. If I wrote a story or two in the morning, that gave me the afternoon for my project. If I spent the morning reporting on the project, the afternoon still had to end with something I could give my editors for the next day's paper.

There were often interruptions that meant I couldn't work on the project for periods of time. While sometimes frustrating, I've learned that it is a fact of life at a small paper that these kind of stories will take longer than they would at a larger-staffed organization.

Resources, too, at small newspapers are often scarce. When I hit rough spots in either my reporting or writing, I stretched outside of our newsroom to ask for help, relying on mentors and trusted peers to guide me.

While researching the story, I gave my editor periodic updates about the work I was doing. But I didn't make a pitch for time to finish it until I knew I could guarantee him a minimum story. It's no easy feat to free a reporter for project work at a small daily, and I knew I needed to make the time

count in order to get the go-ahead.

To make my case, I prepared a fact memo, outlining all that I knew, how I knew it and what was left to find out. I asked for a week to get the story done. I got two days.

The two days, however, stretched into about a month—I still attended city meetings and reported breaking news but was given the rest of the time to devote to the story. Both the editor and publisher, as well as a company lawyer, were involved in reading the final drafts.

The story, when it ran, got the attention of an amazing number of people. There was a lot of debate among myself, the editor and the publisher about whether a 5,000-word story would be read, particularly without significant graphic elements to break up the text. Pine Bluff is also a town of poverty and illiteracy. Residents are not inclined toward civic involvement.

But the story was read. For days after the story ran my phone rang continuously with comments from readers. People who said they didn't normally read the paper went out of their way to get a copy and said they then encouraged others to read it. At meetings, on the street—wherever I went—people stopped me to tell me they read it. Every word. And they were outraged.

The mayor was motivated to make public statements during the next city council meeting, committing to investigate the issues raised in the article and announcing that the head of the department overseeing the spending of the federal money would be "reassigned" until the investigation was complete. The local HUD field office spent days at city hall reviewing paperwork, and then announced that it was recommending that an independent investigation be done by its Office of Inspector General.

The city is still waiting on the results of that investigation.

---

*AmyJo Brown is now a general assignment reporter at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. Before taking the position, she spent six years working at weeklies and small daily newspapers covering local government and doing investigative work.*

The local HUD field office spent days at city hall reviewing paperwork, and then announced that it was recommending that an independent investigation be done by its Office of Inspector General.

Check out the 2008-09 Boot Camp lineup with new opportunities for beginners and experts to learn computer-assisted reporting from IRE trainers and expert CAR practitioners.

Start your CAR career with training in Minneapolis, North Miami or IRE headquarters in Columbia, Mo.

Take your CAR credentials to the next level with our new Web programming series. Check out three- and six-day training options.



**New location! Minneapolis**

**Oct. 6-10, 2008**

**5-Day Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**

**Beaches and Bytes: North Miami**

**Dec. 8-12, 2008**

**FIU Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**

**Advanced CAR Statistics Boot Camp: Tempe, AZ**

**February 6-8, 2009**

**3-Day Advanced Statistics Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**

**Columbia, Missouri, Boot Camps**

**January 4-9, 2009:**

**Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**

**January 9-11, 2009:**

**Mapping Data for News Stories Boot Camp**

**March 22-27, 2009:**

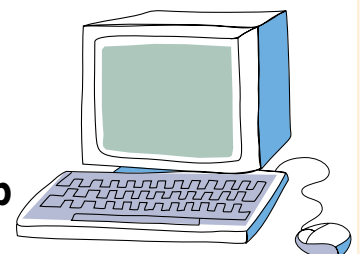
**Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**

**May 17-22, 2009:**

**Advanced Web Programming  
(Django May 17-19, Web May 20-22)**

**August 9-14, 2009:**

**Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp**



**For more information visit: [www.ire.org/training/bootcamps.php](http://www.ire.org/training/bootcamps.php)**



Cosgrove, Iowa, is made up of little more than St. Peter's Catholic Church, an old general store converted into an apartment building, an old school, and a meeting hall, but a rural escort service called Naughty bi-Nature operated here .

# FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

## Stories shed light on a rural prostitution ring

By Lyle Muller

*The (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) Gazette*

In rural Eastern Iowa, these occurrences seemed too bizarre to be true:

- A sheriff's deputy comes out of morning Mass in an unincorporated, rural settlement so small it has no recorded population and sees, outside a house across the road, a dangerous criminal he'd been seeking. The deputy soon discovers a prostitution ring is being run out of the house and fixes like a laser on the messy network feeding it.
- Police are called to a loud house party in a small Iowa town on Easter Sunday and despite not believing residents who say everything is OK,

they feel they have nothing to go on and leave. The police don't know that a 13-year-old kidnapped Twin Cities girl is in the basement being sexually abused by several people and soon will be forced into prostitution.

- Older men in Iowa towns, some with populations of less than 200, are hiring young prostitutes after seeing escort ads in the newspaper.
- The woman running the prostitution ring, who was once a teen prostitute, is being beaten by her live-in boyfriend, who started the business. She sets the kidnapped girl free and becomes the

prosecution's key witness.

A bad guy, a victim, a persistent cop, a woman with a checkered past doing the right thing while still teetering on the line between good and bad. An assortment of off-kilter sidemen. And a rural Iowa setting that, right or wrong, can evoke a sense of innocence. The pieces were in place for an amazing tale that for two weeks, under the title "Fruit of the Poisonous Tree," opened the eyes of people not just in *The Gazette's* Eastern Iowa coverage area but also, thanks to our Gazetteonline.com site, throughout the rest of Iowa and the nation. Even though *The*

The richest mine for those leads was court records, where we pored through all of the trial evidence, witness lists and deposition orders, filings that revealed names of next of kin, child support orders and motions attorneys filed seeking information about the cases.

**NAUGHTY-BI-NATURE  
UNFAMILIAR CHARM**  
24 hrs. 319-936-XXXX

*Gazette* had done a string of stories – some big, some small, but all straightforward crime and court reports – as individuals showed up in court, readers did not appear to be reacting. To get readers’ attention, we decided to do a series as a narrative, a detective story that told the details in a compelling, digestible way.

*Gazette* reporter Jennifer Hemmingsen’s opening sentences on the morning of Sunday, April 20, summed up the moral drama to come: “In the basement of an ordinary-looking Williamsburg home, the 13-year-old girl was given a choice. Either she would have sex with two men nearly twice her age or she would be given back to her kidnapper.”

Presenting this story was no easy task, not just because of its magnitude. Hemmingsen works in an outpost newsroom with only five other reporters – one of them an intern and the other two sports reporters. Her work in Iowa City is part of a news operation with headquarters 30 miles north in Cedar Rapids that has about 100 reporters, assignment editors, copy editors, photographers, online staff, graphic artists and support staff.

Our locally owned newspaper, with Iowa’s second largest circulation, has been in the same family for 125 years. Our commitment to local

news and information is strong. But our resources are not as great as larger newspaper companies. Finding time for this project required juggling and discipline because Hemmingsen still had critical but less exciting daily duties, such as the cops log and other coverage. Moreover, in the last month of prepping the story, a multiple murder and suicide in Iowa City drew statewide and national attention, and her time.

Our investigation got its start in fall 2006 when *Gazette* reporter Zack Kucharski, who formerly worked in the Iowa City newsroom that I oversee, covered some of the court stories in this case. Kucharski told me that so many people in so many locations were involved that police still didn’t know the whole story behind the ring, which had been shut down the year before. What if we could unravel the mess in print and explain how a prostitution ring involving kidnapped teenagers could flourish in rural Eastern Iowa?

Police themselves figured they wouldn’t unravel the case until perhaps the following summer. Kucharski told investigators that we wanted to report this story in detail and started building relationships with them. Meanwhile, he started to pore through court records to identify the main players.

**QUICK LOOK**

**Name of the story, and when it was published:**  
“Fruit of the Poisonous Tree,” April 20-May 3, 2008

**How the story got started:**  
Assigned after discussion with reporter Zack Kucharski about how several spot news stories *The Gazette* covered about this case were connected. It seemed we had so many elements of a good detective story that we could tell it in a narrative that would keep readers interested.

**Length of time taken to report, write and edit the story:**  
Reporting took more than a year and Jennifer Hemmingsen, who wrote the story, took the equivalent of a month writing and rewriting. Some editing was done while Jennifer continued reporting, to evaluate what she had and where to go next. Editing her drafts took about two weeks.

**Major types of documents used:**  
Court records, including full access to trial evidence; trial transcripts; investigative reports provided by some defendants; letters and notes written by defendants; a key defendant’s diaries and notes; prostitution business records; photos; newspaper clippings. We were able to get documents without filing open records requests, but getting some required months of discussions, including with defendants who eventually allowed their attorneys to give us their highly valuable discovery materials, which included deposition transcripts, criminal histories, photo lineups, transcripts from investigative interviews and other documents.

**Major types of human sources used:**  
All of the chief investigating officers and prosecutors; defense attorneys; several defendants, the most critical being the woman who ran the prostitution business and turned state’s evidence; the Twin Cities area teenager kidnapped at the age of 13 and forced into prostitution; the teenager’s father; people who knew the defendants; human trafficking experts; victim advocates; sex abuse experts; and witnesses and court officers at court proceedings we attended.

Brian Ray | The Gazette



Betty Thompson told *The Gazette* she has moved on with her life. She pleaded guilty to a serious misdemeanor charge of aiding and abetting prostitution for her role in Naughty bi-Nature and was sentenced to self-supervised probation.

Brian Ray | The Gazette



Johnson County Sheriff's Office Detective Sgt. Kevin Kinney (left) and Cedar Rapids-based state Division of Criminal Investigation Special Agent in Charge Wade Kisner helped bring down a prostitution ring that began in the apartment building near the church that Kinney attends.

The following spring *The Gazette* moved Kucharski into a new position as online database manager. His successor, Hemmingsen, took over the assignment with Kucharski as a resource. We pulled photographer Brian Ray into the story to consider photo reporting and to attend defendants' court cases. Videographer/reporter Michael Barnes joined the project after he was hired early this year.

We were the only paper paying much attention to this story and relied initially on our own clips in the hunt for deeper leads. The richest mine for those leads was court records. We pored through all of the trial evidence, witness lists and deposition orders, filings that revealed names of next of kin, criminal histories of the central players, child support orders and motions attorneys filed seeking information about the cases. "Follow the paper until there's no

more paper," Hemmingsen advises. "And don't be afraid to talk to defendants, too."

We talked with several defendants and had a big advantage over police because these sources who walked a questionable side of the law felt they could give us great detail without fear of being prosecuted. Their motive: they thought this was a chance to vindicate themselves with their side of the story. This especially was true after they learned that Betty Thompson, who ran the prostitution ring with Robert A. Sallis Sr. and who had come clean with police, talked with us. As a result, Hemmingsen had a wide collection of versions from which she could get as close to the truth as possible.

One of those interviews was with Robert "Moosey" Jones, who pleaded guilty to lascivious acts with a child. Jones told his attorney we could have full access to his case file, which included

more than 1,000 pages of investigative reports, handwritten notes by Jones and others, and photographs. On one of those notes Jones had scribbled the words, "fruit of the poisonous tree."

It became clear that Hemmingsen was nailing down the story. So I gave her one day a week to work exclusively on this project. But I told her any interview for the project could get priority. A given was that any time one of the key players—Thompson, the chief investigator Kevin Kinney or, especially, the 13-year-old kidnapping victim—wanted to talk, Hemmingsen could drop all else.

All three interview sources came through. The most gut-wrenching was the victim, who, just as we were concluding we'd have to forge ahead without her, agreed to an interview if we did not use her name. Excerpts from that interview were published as a sidebar in the middle of the series,

We took our time to answer each pesky question properly and, when ready, to edit the series carefully and design it for the newspaper and online in a way that added to the storytelling.

Brian Ray | The Gazette



Robert A. Sallis Sr. at his criminal conduct trial in Sixth Judicial District Court in Johnson County.

when we thought people whose interests may be waning needed something new and provocative to consider.

I gave Hemmingsen a couple weeks out of the office to write and rewrite. The rule was she could call me but I couldn't call her.

The effort was worth it. A few folks were taken aback by the daily dose of bad-guy news. One person asked me how I'd feel if my small town were plastered across the front page as having prostitutes. Answering was fairly easy—the town of 200 in the story was two miles from where I grew up in northeast Iowa; I e-mailed her that I'd want to know. Other readers felt the same: Overall, comments were positive from readers as well as from law enforcement agencies that hoped the candor with which the story was told would help curb in some small way the insidious crimes of human trafficking and teen prostitution.

We learned a few things about doing projects like this in a small newsroom:

**Don't get caught up in "Big Project" thinking.** Regardless of whether they admit it, some journalists think being on a "project" is *the* goal and forget the real one—finding answers to questions for the specific story you want to tell. A small newsroom doesn't have the luxury of wandering aimlessly through a project, especially when the assigned reporter has other work to do. Our approach was to

keep a deadline off the series until we could answer a primary question: How could human trafficking involving teenage girls flourish in Eastern Iowa without people knowing about it? We took our time to answer each pesky question properly and, when ready, to edit the series carefully and design it for the newspaper and online in a way that added to the storytelling.

**Rely on teamwork.** When we had critical mass in terms of reporting and ideas for photos and the Web, all of the key people—reporters, photographers, editors, artists, layout designers, online—met to share information and give input. The result was fabulous, as each person working on his or her portion of the presentation took ownership not only of that task but of the whole series. Inspired people produced solid work and got personal satisfaction. Nothing builds newsroom morale like a good story. Also, Kucharski's willingness to stick with the project while handing off what we knew would be a great story to Hemmingsen kept the project glued together.

**Commit.** Ask yourself what people will talk about once you publish your story. Will it be the briefs you feel compelled to dump on your reporter's desk or the big story for which you are building momentum? The briefs are important, but get someone else to do those kinds of tasks. If you've told reporters an investigation is important, back it up with time. Save pulling them from the investigation for the stories you really need them to do.

When we had critical mass in terms of reporting and ideas for photos and the Web, all of the key people—reporters, photographers, editors, artists, layout designers, online—met to share information and give input.

**Don't blow the momentum gained with readers once the project is done.** Dig into your next story. You have just increased your readers' expectations for high-grade journalism. Don't waste their trust by resting on yesterday's news.

*Lyle Muller has been with The (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) Gazette since March 1987 in various capacities, covering higher education and health and science for several years. He served as a bureau chief, Iowa City editor and investigations and special projects editor before his appointment in 2005 as senior editor.*

Brian Ray | The Gazette



Betty Thompson became a key source in *The Gazette* stories. She testified against her one-time associate in a prostitution ring, Robert A. Sallis Sr.



The attorney general intervened on the *Press Herald's* behalf to provide access to a law enforcement database of accidents on Maine roads. The paper used it to take a broad look at accidents involving drivers with suspended licenses.

# ROAD HAZARDS

## Series examines the toll taken by those who drive with suspended licenses

By Kevin Wack and Andrew Russell  
*Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram*

**O**n July 29, 2005, Scott Hewitt, a trucker with a suspended license and 63 prior motor-vehicle convictions, slammed his tractor-trailer into the rear end of a car on a Maine highway, killing the 40-year-old woman behind the wheel, Tina Turcotte.

The high-profile fatal crash prompted a public outcry and led the Maine Legislature a year later to pass “Tina’s Law,” which imposed stricter punishments on chronic suspended drivers like Hewitt.

Throughout the statewide debate, however, one critical question remained unanswered: What

was the real impact of drivers with suspended licenses?

The state commission set up to study suspended drivers didn’t address this question. And our own reporting turned up little research on the subject.

Answering that question formed the basis of a year-long investigation by reporter Kevin Wack that culminated in a three-day series, “Danger Behind the Wheel,” published Jan. 20-22 in the *Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram* and online at [www.pressherald.com](http://www.pressherald.com).

The series statistically documented that while

suspended drivers make up only a tiny percentage of drivers on the road, they pose an outsized risk when they get behind the wheel. And it uncovered holes in the state’s efforts to regulate these drivers beyond those addressed by the new law.

The series also used real-life examples to explore the culture of suspended driving in Maine, a rural state where there is little access to public transportation. In one instance, the mother of 27-year-old Sarah Cowley talked about her reaction when police came to her door after her daughter’s death in a single-car crash.

The series statistically documented that while suspended drivers make up only a tiny percentage of drivers on the road, they pose an outsized risk when they get behind the wheel.

“My first thought was, ‘I’m not surprised,’” Perl Cowley told Wack as she recounted her daughter’s battles with alcohol.

## Getting the data

Wack began his reporting in early 2007. His reporting led him to a statewide crash database kept by the Maine Department of Public Safety.

The database is public record and contains raw investigative reports from crashes on public roads if they result in an injury or at least \$1,000 in property damage. The reports also include information on whether a driver’s license is suspended.

The state initially refused to provide the newspaper with a copy of the database, arguing that it could be obtained only through InforME, a Web site run by NIC Inc., a Kansas-based company authorized by Maine law to sell public information online. InforME offered to sell the newspaper a copy of the database for \$96,000.

The newspaper contended that state law required the Department of Public Safety to provide the data directly and for a reasonable cost. At the newspaper’s request, the state Attorney General’s Office intervened in the dispute, after which the department agreed to provide a copy of the database to the newspaper at no charge.

The database contains records on about 188,000 crashes. We focused our analysis on all crashes from Jan. 1, 2003, to Dec. 31, 2006—about 160,000 in all—because they were the only years with complete data. Experts at *The Seattle Times* converted the database into a usable format. (The Seattle Times Co. owns the *Portland Press Herald/ Maine Sunday Telegram*.)

It soon became evident that the crash database would be a powerful tool for analyzing traffic safety patterns.

Specifically, it could tell us whether crashes involving motorists with suspended licenses were more severe than crashes involving licensed drivers. We ran scores of queries in Microsoft Access to answer that question. The answer was a resounding yes.

The database showed the following:

- An accident involving a driver with a suspended license is six times more likely to result in a fatality than one involving a licensed driver.
- An accident involving a driver with a suspended license is four times more likely to cause an injury that leaves someone incapacitated.
- And it is ten times more likely that the suspended driver has been drinking or using drugs at the time of the crash.

A fatality rate was established by dividing the number of deaths involving suspended drivers by the total number of suspended drivers involved in crashes; a separate fatality rate was established the same way with licensed drivers.

The rates were then multiplied by 1,000 to determine the number of deaths for every 1,000 drivers involved in crashes. Similar analyses were

conducted to establish rates of serious injury and alcohol or drug use.

Overall, 65 people were killed in Maine between 2003 and 2006 in crashes involving a driver with a suspended license. That averaged out to one such death every three weeks—a big number in a state with just 1.3 million residents. And of course, not a single one of these crashes should have happened, since none of the drivers should have been behind the wheel.

We used these statistical findings as the jumping-off point for a series on the dangers posed by drivers with suspended licenses. This was more or less untilled ground; the issue had drawn surprisingly little attention nationally.

“If you look around, there is no group for folks whose husbands, wives, sons and daughters have been killed by people who drive without a valid license,” Bob Scopatz, a traffic safety researcher, told us.

What makes a dangerous driver?

We approached the problem from every possible angle—interviewing police, prosecutors, state bureaucrats, traffic safety researchers, politicians, crash victims and suspended drivers themselves.

We had to be careful about how we framed the issue. State motor-vehicle agencies suspend licenses for scores of reasons, so we needed to determine which suspended drivers were causing the heightened danger.

To do this, we obtained from the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles the driving records of every suspended driver involved in a fatal crash in Maine between 2003 and 2006. We found that about two-thirds of these drivers had at least one prior conviction for driving without a valid license, or for an alcohol- or drug-related driving offense. Not surprisingly, the people whose licenses were suspended for administrative reasons—such as failing to pay traffic fines—didn’t seem to be the problem. Most of the deaths were caused by individuals whose records showed a history of poor driving skills or bad judgment behind the wheel.

We then evaluated the state’s efforts to protect the traveling public. Because of the heavy news coverage surrounding fatalities caused by drivers with suspended licenses, these offenders had already received a lot of attention from the Maine Legislature when it passed a law stiffening penalties for chronic bad drivers.

As our reporting progressed, however, it became clear that more laws were not necessarily needed. What was needed was better bureaucratic enforcement of the existing laws.

A chronic bad driver named Alton Grover provided a case in point. Because of a pattern of prior violations, Grover should have gotten at least six months in jail after he was convicted of driving with a suspended license in January 2007. But the paperwork from his most recent conviction languished on a bureaucrat’s desk and hadn’t been entered into the state’s computer system. As a result, Grover was

We obtained from the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles the driving records of every suspended driver involved in a fatal crash in Maine between 2003 and 2006. We found that about two-thirds of these drivers had at least one prior conviction for driving without a valid license, or for an alcohol- or drug-related driving offense.

John Ewing | Portland Press Herald



Harold and Margaret Weisbein lost their son in a crash with a driver operating with a suspended driver’s license.



We were able to show that a switch in computer systems at the state agency that processes traffic violations had caused a huge backlog of work and delays that had cascaded through the state bureaucracy.

sentenced to just five days behind bars.

As it turned out, Grover's case was the tip of the iceberg. We were able to show that a switch in computer systems at the state agency that processes traffic violations had caused a huge backlog of work and delays that had cascaded through the state bureaucracy. As a result, the number of state-issued license suspensions plummeted by more than 30,000 in a single year, and the number of motorists charged with driving with a suspended license plunged by more than 3,000.

### Writing the stories

To check our statistical findings, we hired Jeff Porter, who at the time was the database library director for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting at the Missouri School of Journalism.

Porter verified Wack's research by examining the database's content, reviewing the queries Wack created to ask the database questions and auditing his statistical conclusions.

Meanwhile, the Web team set to work producing extra online content. Web producer Suzi Piker

made videos of the families of several of the victims profiled in the series. Web graphic artist Jeff Woodbury created an interactive map of all fatal accidents involving suspended drivers over the three-year period.

Woodbury also created the Day 1 centerpiece graphic—a visually dramatic photo display showing the “human toll” of suspended drivers.

The series generated a great deal of positive feedback from our readers on the Web and in letters to the editor. Traffic safety is an issue that hits home with people: Nearly everyone uses the roads, and many families have been affected by automobile tragedies.

---

*Andrew Russell is assistant managing editor for local news at the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. Kevin Wack worked as a reporter at the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram from January 2004 to July 2008. In November he begins a journalism fellowship with the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C.*

## PUTTING IT TOGETHER ONLINE

### By Angie Muhs

The *Press Herald's* online team became involved with the “Danger Behind the Wheel” series several months in advance of publication but well into reporter Kevin Wack's research.

Wack already had a solid idea of where his reporting would take him with the project, but the online team was being brought in with ample time to create and shape its presentation online.

It was a key project for the paper, in part because the newsroom had only recently taken on the management of our Web site, [www.pressherald.com](http://www.pressherald.com), which previously had been run by a separate online division. This was our first chance to showcase a major work. We had only recently hired our first online content producer, Suzi Piker, and shifted an artist, Jeff Woodbury, to focus primarily on the Web. Photographer Greg Rec, who has a strong interest in producing video for online, also joined the project effort.

The lead time allowed for deep collaboration between the online team and Wack and his editor, Andrew Russell. “We had the luxury of time to think strategically about the layout of the page,” Piker said. “We tried to create an ‘experience’ for the user of going in-depth on this subject of dangerous drivers.”

Two central pieces of the online portion of the project quickly emerged: Woodbury began working with Wack to create an interactive map that would detail the fatal crashes that involved a driver with a suspended license. With more than 45 crashes over four years being examined, this was the kind of information that couldn't be presented well in print.

Woodbury used Flash to create the map and timeline, which allowed the user to view details of each crash by either selecting it from the map of Maine or from a timeline. “My goal was to make it as simple and intuitive as possible,” Woodbury said. Achieving that goal, however, was anything but simple. Each element of the map required its own coding, and

information frequently had to be revised as Wack's reporting uncovered new details.

Meanwhile, Piker was coordinating with Wack as she produced videos featuring the relatives of some of those who had been killed by drivers who shouldn't have been on the roads. Wack talked to these relatives for his articles but largely focused on the issue and the policy questions. Piker used the videos as the outlet for telling and showing the human toll exacted by those crashes.

Piker took a simple approach, crafting slideshow-like presentations of the victims, shown through family photographs, and interspersing it with footage of their loved ones, who narrate the videos after Piker explains the circumstances of the crash. The simplicity leaves the focus on the family members' emotions—Tina Turcotte's mother, for instance, occasionally still lapsed into the present tense when talking about her daughter.

We rounded out the package with additional graphics from Woodbury and video by Rec of a night out with a deputy who has one of the highest rates of arrest for drivers operating after suspension. Piker also created a centralized comment area for readers to discuss the issue, although we left the comment option available on individual stories as well.

From the online team's perspective, the key factors of success were the close collaboration they had with Wack and Russell and the lead time, which gave them ample opportunity to tackle ambitious elements while juggling the demands of day-to-day news. This project served as an excellent model for how to handle such an effort, and there is much from the process that we'll replicate in future investigative efforts.

*Angie Muhs is deputy managing editor of online and multimedia. She joined the Press Herald in April 2005 and has overseen Pressherald.com since its 2007 move to the newsroom's control.*



# SMALL NEWSROOM RESOURCES

By Tori Moss, *The IRE Journal*

## Stories

- **Story No. 18712:** Through extensive interviews and the creation of a database of clerk records, prosecution files and police reports, the newspaper identified repeated shortcomings in the county's prosecution of sexual assault cases over the past decade. Sandy Hodson, *The Augusta Chronicle* (2001)
- **Story No. 19601:** A massive consolidation drive in West Virginia throughout the 1990s left 36,000 rural children with bus rides longer than stipulated by state guidelines. The series of stories proved that school and state officials broke promises of providing advanced placement courses at the consolidated schools and failed to track whether the closings saved the millions of dollars they claimed. Eric Eyre, Scott Finn, *Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette* (2002)
- **Story No. 21131:** The Baton Rouge Parish Assessor's Office was not following the Louisiana Constitution's requirement that all residential property values be assessed every four years. Some people who had lived in their homes for several years were being taxed on values that were below market rates, but properties were assessed when they changed ownership, which left new homeowners taxed on the current values. Mike Dunne, Penny Brown Roberts, Curt Eysink, *Baton Rouge Advocate* (2003)
- **Story No. 21410:** An analysis of pay records showed the city paid \$1.4 million in overtime in 2003, and roughly one out of nine employees made at least 20 percent over their base pay. Dave Moore, *Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune* (2004)
- **Story No. 22672:** In an effort to see how compliant the local government was with releasing public records, 18 journalism students requested documents from city halls, police departments and school districts. They then filled out a questionnaire and rated their experiences. Some agencies denied the requests, some questioned the students' motivations for the records and some were openly hostile. Christopher Mele, Brendan Scott, *The*

(Middletown, N.Y.) *Times Herald-Record* (2005)

- **Story No. 22862:** Following a story about an elderly woman who was robbed for her pain pills, the station found drugstores violating state and federal laws by improperly disposing of customers' health records. In response, many pharmacies eventually implemented new practices to protect consumer privacy. Bob Segall, Bill Ditton, Jim Hall, Gerry Lanosga, Holly Stephen, *WTHR-Indianapolis* (2006)

## Tipsheets

- **No. 2003:** "CAR in Small Newsrooms," Jennie Coughlin, *The (Staunton, Va.) News Leader*. Coughlin addresses the biggest factors that affect incorporating CAR into small newsrooms—scale and time.
- **No. 2322:** "Analyzing Speeding Tickets," Paul Overberg, *USA Today*. Overberg considers speeding tickets a CAR staple, but he admits and addresses the challenges of analyzing the data. Links to various speeding ticket packages are included.
- **No. 2702:** "Stretching Your Resources to Do Investigations," Dee J. Hall, (Madison) *Wisconsin State Journal*. Hall offers tips for journalists without big expense accounts who want to create quality investigative work. She says journalists should take advantage of public interest groups, whistleblowers and experts who often provide free information or assistance.
- **No. 3098:** "The Shrinking Newsroom: Watchdog Work with Limited Staff," Steve Daniels, *WTVD-Raleigh-Durham*. Daniels provides news stations suggestions for working within their means. Topics include traveling, two-camera shooting and collaborating with other stations.

## The IRE Journal

"Outside Extortion: Family Members Forced to Pay for Inmate Safety," Kathleen Johnston, Gerry Lanosga, *WTHR-Indianapolis*. More than 20 stories of trafficking, extortion, assaults and more at an Indiana prison began with a phone call from a

desperate woman trying to protect her imprisoned son. (Sept./Oct. 2001)

"Pump Check: Motorists Have 1-in-25 Chance of Buying Gas from a Pump That Fails to Give Amounts Within Legal Limit," Lee Davidson, *The (Salt Lake City) Deseret Morning News*. In one week, Davidson produced a piece (Story No. 22695) backed by a state database that showed, among other things, that some stations had all of their pumps fail in repeated inspections, but the state had not issued fines or closed the pumps. (Jan./Feb. 2007)

"Small Newsroom Ideas," George Kennedy, Missouri School of Journalism. Kennedy compiles investigative reporting tips and story ideas from Mary Fricker, Andy Hall and Tom Roeder that are tailored for reporters from small newsrooms. (Sept./Oct. 2002)

## Uplink

"Measuring Long Bus Rides for Rural Children," Scott Finn, Eric Eyre, *The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette*. The West Virginia Department of Education ignored a state law limiting the length of bus rides for rural students and had no database or standardized record with the information. With records gained through state FOI requests to schools, the reporters created an Excel spreadsheet that showed when each run began, when it stopped and how much time children rode in between. (See Story No. 19601.) (Sept./Oct. 2002)

## Online Sources

American FactFinder (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) The U.S. Census Bureau site provides demographic fact sheets by city, county or ZIP code. In addition to population data, the site lists social, economic and housing characteristics.

Power Reporting: Beat by Beat ([http://powerreporting.com/category/Beat\\_by\\_beat](http://powerreporting.com/category/Beat_by_beat)) The *Columbia Journalism Review* lists Web resources for specific news beats. Categories include aging, housing, race, terrorism and more.



You're reading a featured story from Uplink, IRE and NICAR's online publication devoted to computer-assisted reporting. Read more about its re-launch on p. 29.

Jill Torrance | Arizona Daily Star



Special programs, such as computer-based tutoring, are designed to help students keep up, but a data analysis showed that it's still common for Arizona students to advance to the next grade without mastering required skills.

# ANALYSIS QUANTIFIES SOCIAL PROMOTION

BY JACK GILLUM  
ARIZONA DAILY STAR (TUCSON)

The phenomenon of social promotion in education seemed impossible to grasp.

Teachers and parents have lamented the practice for years, watching as students were moved on to the next level even though their grades in key subjects didn't merit their advancement. Still, no one could say how widespread the problem was. No one had found a way to quantify it.

Last summer, a team of *Arizona Daily Star* reporters decided to try. Based on a tip from an educator who had seen the problems caused by social promo-

tion firsthand, the reporters began asking questions: Just how rampant is this practice? How does it harm students, parents, the community? What kind of data would we need to prove it?

Surely, we thought, the data were there. Schools keep tons of electronic information on students, including grades, test scores and promotion rates. But getting at students' actual letter grades proved difficult.

Designing database queries that accurately measured the scope of promotion also proved compli-

cated. Of the nine districts we analyzed, each had its own nuances and policies on how more than 60,000 middle and high school students should be advanced to the next grade each year.

As we worked, we found grade inflation also was prevalent. By comparing standardized test scores to students' performance in their respective subjects, we were able to gauge how often children received higher grades than they deserved.

The analysis provided a unique way for our paper to be a watchdog on education policy by confronting an open secret and quantifying the degree of failure in almost all Tucson-area school districts. (The project is available online at [www.azstarnet.com/socialpromotion](http://www.azstarnet.com/socialpromotion).)

Perhaps the biggest challenge for us was figuring out *what* to ask for—and then *how* to ask for it in the right way.

We drafted several versions of public-records requests, each with its own degree of precision to counter semantic arguments from certain districts. Under Arizona Public Records Law, electronic-information requests can be ambiguous, and as such,

some districts later would tell us that information was not technically a document and not subject to public inspection.

We sidestepped these pitfalls with persistence. The largest school district in Tucson had the most complete data and gave us a tab-delimited file of at least five years' worth of data, including summer school records. We used the latter to account for students who made up courses in remedial instruction.

All of the districts agreed to replace student names with a unique identifier, such as No. 29938, to preclude privacy issues. That unique identifier was important to aggregate results for individual students and track their progress from year to year.

We found it most helpful when districts simply gave us a CD of tab-delimited data. We then finessed that data to our formatting standards, which many times meant adding in a unique school ID to which we could later join other important data—such as promotion rates, test scores and school addresses.

One district, Amphitheater Public Schools, had refused for months to give us data, fearing it would violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. However, district officials later provided records, which we analyzed in a follow-up story.

The best way to account for social promotion was to first tally how often students failed classes each year. I used Microsoft Access to analyze the data and ESRI ArcView geographic information system to map citywide trends.

Then we:

- Grouped together the number of students who failed one or more semesters' worth of core classes or who failed two or more quarters in a year. Those queries were tailored for each district, and it was repeated for those who failed any course, not just those in English, math, science and social studies.
- Grouped those results by the number of students who failed one or more, two or more, or three or more classes and tallied the results.
- Sorted the results by class or grade level.
- Performed a database join on other tables that contained state-reported retention rates and enrollment figures for each grade level that year.
- Created formulas to calculate the percentage of students who failed one, two or three or more classes.
- Compared the percentage of failures with the school's retention rate for that grade level during that respective year. For example, if 35 percent of students failed core classes and the retention rate was 5 percent, then 30 percent of the students that year probably shouldn't have been promoted, our experts said.

The key to the analysis was the use of macros in Access, which ran a series of queries and performed joins on multiple tables. A macro is a small program that runs a series of commands in a particular order. The macros allowed us to run dozens of queries at once, without having to click each one in succession.

## UPLINK ... BACK ONLINE!



### Dear IRE member:

In this era of information overload, media convergence and tight newsroom budgets, smart computer-assisted reporting is more than ever a vital tool for successful journalism. For nearly two decades Uplink has helped budding journalists learn the tools of the trade and served as a forum where more advanced practitioners can swap technical tips.

I'd like to invite you to join us for a free two-week trial of Uplink during our re-launch (on the Web) at [uplink.nicar.org](http://uplink.nicar.org). More details will be available at [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org) and [data.nicar.org](http://data.nicar.org).

We're excited about the new and improved Uplink. You'll see what subscribers have come to expect: articles from seasoned journalists telling how they used data analysis in their news stories. We'll continue to run First Venture stories by CAR newcomers, Mapping it Out features and Tech Tips.

So what's new? Regular blog posts from some of the top CAR geeks, who will keep you informed about freedom of information, software and database trends. Later, we plan to roll out other features as we upgrade our Web platform.

### Here are some of the things you'll read about:

- How the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* used payroll data to show retired city workers cashing out sick time.
- How KIRO-Seattle used transportation data to uncover deadly flaws in luxury recreational vehicles.
- How *The Buffalo* (N.Y.) *News* used geographic information software and lottery data to discover that the poorest residents play the games with the stingiest payouts.
- How *USA Today* found lobbyist-connected lawyers giving to Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

### You'll also get to read some postings from our new roster of bloggers:

- David Donald, the new data editor at the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C. Donald spent the four previous years at IRE's training director and is an expert in stats.
- David Herzog, associate professor of journalism at the University of Missouri and academic adviser to NICAR. Herzog is author of "Mapping the News: Case Studies in GIS and Journalism."
- Brant Houston, the Knight Chair for Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois. Houston is the former executive director of IRE and author of "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide."
- Jennifer LaFleur, director of CAR for ProPublica in New York. LaFleur was IRE's first training director and is the author of IRE's "Mapping for Stories: A Computer-Assisted Reporting Guide."
- Aron Pilhofer, editor for interactive news technology at *The New York Times*. He is a former director of IRE's Campaign Finance Information Center and co-author of IRE's "Unstacking the Deck: A Reporter's Guide To Campaign Finance."
- Neil Reisner, associate professor of journalism at Florida International University. Reisner is a veteran reporter and editor who also has served as IRE's training director.
- Matt Waite, news technologist for the *St. Petersburg Times*. Waite is a creator of PolitiFact and a winner of the 2005 Philip Meyer Journalism Award.
- MaryJo Webster, CAR editor for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Webster, while a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, directed the IRE and NICAR Database Library.
- Derek Willis works in Web development for [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com). He is co-author of IRE's "Unstacking the Deck: A Reporter's Guide To Campaign Finance."

I hope you enjoy the preview of the new Uplink and, if you are not a subscriber, decide to join us.

David Herzog  
Uplink managing editor  
[dherzog@ire.org](mailto:dherzog@ire.org)



Examining raw data on students' grades provided a more useful picture of academic performance than results from state standardized tests.

For the second part of our analysis, we analyzed the rate of failure on English or math courses, subjects that are tested on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, the state assessment exam. By comparing a

cohort's grades in a particular subject with how many passed state tests, we could figure out percentage point differences in students who were probably not earning the grades they received.

I aggregated these findings for the project's three education reporters, George B. Sánchez, Andrea Rivera and Jamar Younger. The huge task for me was giving them enough information to be helpful but not so much that it would waste their time.

I decided to find the biggest trends—e.g., schools with the highest failure rates or social promotion's effects on transition from middle school—and put those together in a series of memos for each reporter's district. I also gave them raw spreadsheets of data, which were outputted nicely from Access.

From there, reporters tracked down students, educators, academics, business leaders and parents to examine the effects and real-life stories of social promotion.

Newspapers—ours included—frequently have examined test scores as an assessment of student performance. But looking at student grades gave us a better picture of how students fare in the classroom, rather than during a half-day's worth of testing. The story has since led to a flood of angry letters from parents and educators, discussion in the Arizona Legislature and tough talk from the state's superintendent of public instruction.

*Jack Gillum is a business reporter and database specialist at the Arizona Daily Star, where he also covers aviation, tech and defense news. Contact him at [jgillum@azstarnet.com](mailto:jgillum@azstarnet.com).*

# ON THE BEAT: COVERING HOSPITALS

Transform your reporting with the latest in e-learning from AH CJ and NewsU.

“On the Beat: Covering Hospitals” guides you through the sources and resources you need to tackle the beat. Plus, you’ll have a virtual “mentor” to walk you through the maze of reports, statistics and sources.

This online training module combines the reporting expertise of AH CJ with NewsU’s innovative e-learning experience.

Don’t miss out on this great journalism training.

Start today at [www.healthjournalism.org/CoveringHospitals](http://www.healthjournalism.org/CoveringHospitals)

PART  
1



THE EDITOR

In this free online simulation, which was developed just for this training module using a gaming platform, you’ll learn how to:

- Evaluate hospital data available in public records and reports
- Explore hospital finances
- Investigate the quality of care at your local hospital
- Dig deeper when interviewing sources
- Use Web sites to expand your coverage



Association of Health Care Journalists  
Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism  
*Better coverage. Better health.*



News University

Course made possible through a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

# BREAK THROUGHGS

Countdown to  
Sept. 30th deadline!

## FUNDING IRE'S FUTURE 2008 ANNUAL IRE ENDOWMENT APPEAL

**This is your last chance to take advantage of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation match; the program ends Sept. 30. For every \$2 you donate—or pledge over three years—Knight will send IRE \$1. This is an excellent opportunity to support the future of IRE and multiply your philanthropic dollars.**

IRE seeks donations from all audiences that value quality investigative journalism and recognize its importance in keeping governments, businesses and individuals accountable.

IRE depends on contributions to maintain and

improve its services and to create long-term financial stability. At present, more than one-third of IRE's \$1.4 million annual budget is funded through donations.

By achieving a \$5-million endowment, IRE will ensure its uninterrupted support of investigative journalists and will be able to focus its efforts on emerging programs. In short, a strong endowment will allow IRE to continue to foster excellence in investigative journalism, a mission essential to a free and democratic society.

All endowment gifts make a difference because, taken together, they form a strong foundation that continues to grow for years to come.

To make a contribution, please use the form below, visit [www.ire.org/endowment](http://www.ire.org/endowment) or phone IRE Development Officer Jennifer Erickson at 573-884-2222. All contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.

### YES! I would like to support IRE's Endowment Fund

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Company \_\_\_\_\_

Company Address \_\_\_\_\_

Wk Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Hm Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**To pledge, check one of the boxes and sign your name:**

I will pledge \$\_\_\_\_\_ per year for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

Signature for pledges \_\_\_\_\_

**One-time donation:**

I would like to support IRE with a \$\_\_\_\_\_ donation.

**Payment Method:**

My check is enclosed and made payable to IRE.

Please write "Endowment" in the memo line of your check.

Please charge my credit card with the amount indicated: \$\_\_\_\_\_

VISA  MasterCard  American Express

Account Number \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

I would like my gift to benefit IRE in this way:

- Endowment - general operations  
 Endowment - specific program, services or resource area

Name area

\_\_\_\_\_

- My company will match my contribution (For a list of matching participants, see [www.ire.org/endowment/matching.html](http://www.ire.org/endowment/matching.html).)

- CHECK BOX IF YOU DON'T WANT YOUR NAME DISCLOSED AS A DONOR.**



**Mail or fax this form to:**  
Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.  
138 Neff Annex, Columbia, MO 65211  
PH 573-882-2042 • [www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org)  
FAX 573-882-5431

# TRACKING AID FOR STORM SURVIVORS

## Supplies meant for Katrina victims instead sold as surplus

BY ABBIE BOUDREAU AND SCOTT ZAMOST  
CNN SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

The typewritten tip arrived in February on the kind of inexpensive stationery you'd buy at a convenience store. But the unassuming letter belied the critical information it contained.

The writer said he worked for the military and had heard the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was offering supplies to his military branch in Texas. He wondered, "Why would we have 121 truckloads of household items from FEMA?" And we wondered, "Why was FEMA giving away all of this valuable merchandise? Who should have received these supplies in the first place?"

Those were the first questions among many we had during the next four months as we investigated what we called the "Hurricane Giveaway."

What we discovered was more than a major bungling by FEMA, but serious disconnects within the states themselves involving one of the worst storms in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina. We would soon learn the items in question could have saved taxpayers millions of dollars and, even more importantly, could have helped Katrina victims rebuild their lives. But that never happened. Instead we found these supplies had been sitting in FEMA warehouses for at least two years, while Katrina victims struggled to survive and were still in need of even the most basic supplies.

### Surplus sneak-peak

Our tipster included a flier from the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) advertising a "special on-site screening" to view "miscellaneous household items." These items were considered surplus property and were being offered to federal agencies and states. Right away, we were surprised to hear there was "surplus property" available, and we questioned from the beginning why FEMA was holding on to extra supplies. We learned from government Web sites that screenings are a common way for the government to dispose of items it no longer needed. These items included towels, sheets, pillows, coffee makers, sandals, dinnerware—all brand new—and filled 121 truckloads.

We called the contact name on the GSA flier, who referred us to a GSA press officer. We had hoped to avoid going through an official representative, thinking it was too early to tell anyone we were looking

into this "screening." But we had no other choice. So we called the spokeswoman, and she had very little knowledge of the screening. The more questions we had, the fewer answers she offered, and finally she asked us to put our questions in an e-mail.

While we awaited a response, we began calling every state agency that handles federal surplus. At that time, we had no idea which states, if any, had taken the items. We figured we should start with Louisiana. After all, if anyone needed these supplies, wouldn't Louisiana—along with Mississippi—be at the top of the list?

The conversation with Louisiana's director of surplus property was revealing. He told us he knew about the giveaway and mentioned that he had photos of what was being offered. However, he would not give them to us and suggested we call the director of another state surplus agency.

### Giveaway details

We eventually confirmed the photos we were trying to obtain originated from the state surplus agency in Texas. But that agency also refused to release the photos, making us more suspicious that no one wanted the public to know about these items. Then we discovered the photos had been attached to an e-mail that was sent around the country from the Texas agency's director, making it a public record. We filed a request for the photos, and finally they gave us the original e-mail to which they were attached.

When we opened them, we knew we had a story. This was brand new stuff—the kind of items that would obviously help Katrina victims. But at this point, we still had not confirmed these items were even intended for those victims.

Finally, the answer came from the GSA. In a detailed response to our questions, the agency confirmed the supplies, which the agency initially estimated were worth \$85 million, were purchased or donated for Katrina and Rita victims.

The GSA provided a breakdown of who received the supplies, including eight federal prisons, the U.S. Postal Service, Border Patrol and 16 states. But it made no mention of any of these supplies going to Katrina victims.

Now we had critical information in writing.

CNN photo



Warehouses held 121 truckloads of purchased and donated supplies that never reached hurricane victims. Information about the supplies never reached local aid groups.

But the primary question remained: Why?

We called the surplus agencies in those 16 states. Surprisingly, Louisiana was not on the list of states that received the items. The state's surplus director said he was not aware there was a need for these supplies because no nonprofit group had contacted him. "Nobody has requested this type of property," he said.

The surplus agency director of the other hardest hit state, Mississippi, would not return our repeated phone calls.

Meanwhile, other states told us they were happy to get these items.

### "Not news"

We went directly to FEMA. Our initial conversations went nowhere. We called James McIntyre, the acting press secretary, but a lower-level employee who had no answers called us back. We again asked to speak to McIntyre and when he finally returned our calls, he had few details. He insisted it was a standard procedure that FEMA used to declare items "surplus" and later told us it was costing more than one million dollars a year to store the supplies.

Our requests for an on-camera interview were rejected, and he bluntly told us this was "not news."

That response insulted Martha Kegel, executive director of Unity of Greater New Orleans, a nonprofit group that finds housing for Katrina victims. We went to New Orleans and showed her photos of the FEMA supplies and toured the Unity warehouse, located in an old church.

"It just makes me sad to look at this," Kegel told us. "I mean, is there any way we could still get this?"

We visited some Katrina victims who had just moved into apartments but had no real supplies, other than a few old pots and pans. Others we interviewed were still living in tents.

Still in need

We still wanted to know: Who knew besides FEMA that the supplies existed? Our calls to major and minor relief agencies were met with disbelief. No one knew what we were talking about. Unity of Greater New Orleans certainly didn't know and told us the lower-level FEMA employees working with them never mentioned there were millions of dollars worth of new household supplies gathering dust.

The Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA), which is supposed to coordinate the state's disaster relief program, had no idea these items existed and had been offered to the state's surplus agency. The agencies did not communicate with each other.

After our investigation aired, that all changed. The LRA took over efforts to return the FEMA supplies to nonprofits in Louisiana. Incredulous state lawmakers held a hearing to find out what happened. U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu took the lead, demanding any unused supplies be returned to Louisiana.

"There is a particular and critical need for exactly these materials," Landrieu wrote in a June 12 letter to Michael Chertoff, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

Only eight days after our story first aired, three trucks stocked with FEMA surplus supplies rolled into New Orleans. It turns out Texas had not distributed all of the items it had gotten. Other federal agencies, including the U.S. Postal Service, also returned unused supplies to Louisiana, and in the weeks that followed, trucks continued deliveries in other areas of the state. Thousands of Katrina victims will now receive those much needed items.

That would have been the end of the story. But

there was another angle we could not ignore in Mississippi, where the situation turned out to be even more complicated.

We went to Biloxi and toured the neighborhoods hardest hit by the storm. We talked to people still living in FEMA trailers and others who were trying to rebuild their homes and start over. Leaders of nonprofit groups were astounded when we told them of the supplies.

"I mean you would have to be living under a rock not to know there is still a need," said Cass Woods, the project coordinator of Coastal Women For Change.

For several months, our repeated calls failed to get any response from the director of Mississippi's surplus agency. His spokeswoman finally called us back and we started the process again. What supplies did you receive? Where did they go? How are nonprofits notified?

Mississippi's surplus agency, unlike Louisiana's, took a large amount of supplies but gave them to state prisons and other agencies. Again, state records showed that Katrina victims got nothing.

"There may be a need, but we were not notified that there was a great need for this particular property," Mississippi's surplus agency spokeswoman, Kym Wiggins, told us by phone.

Other state records showed that no nonprofits helping the needy or homeless were registered with Mississippi's surplus agency, a requirement to qualify for the materials. The reason: most of the nonprofits we interviewed didn't know it existed. It was another glaring example of the government disconnect at both the federal and state level.

Fixing the system

After our latest story, U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, told us he was disturbed by this "debacle" and scheduled a congressional hearing. He and Landrieu, as well as other lawmakers, grilled FEMA in late July during a joint hearing of the House and Senate Homeland Security committees about why the supplies were kept in storage. A FEMA official told us mistakes were made and said changes in how donations are tracked and received will ensure something like this would not happen again.

The GSA also reported a large math mistake in its accounting, saying the 121 truckloads of FEMA supplies were worth \$18.5 million instead of \$85 million.

The "mistake in tallying the cost of the household goods (FEMA) deemed surplus does not change the situation," Landrieu told us. "For two years, FEMA sat on goods intended for hurricane victims and then rerouted them to other states and federal agencies."

Three years after Katrina, the memories of those victims are never far away. "Thank you for being here," one New Orleans resident told us as we prepared to go on air. One week and a day after our investigation broke, we went back to New Orleans and reported live as the first truck arrived, which delivered 1,500 brand new dinnerware sets to Unity of Greater New Orleans.

All of those FEMA boxes, we were reminded, didn't just contain supplies. They represented hope.

*Abbie Boudreau is an investigative correspondent and Scott Zamost is an investigative producer for CNN. Both are based in Atlanta.*

RESOURCES FOR NATURAL DISASTER FOLLOW-UP COVERAGE

Stories

- **Story No. 21779:** Thousands of Miami-Dade County residents received more than \$30 million in FEMA hurricane relief checks despite none of the four hurricanes of 2004 directing hitting the county. The investigation into FEMA's payment process extended to other states and found similar fraud. Sally Kestin, Megan O'Matz, John Maines, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* (2004)
- **Story No. 22863:** By accounting for each tornado siren in a nine-county area, WTHR revealed problems with Indiana's tornado siren warning systems ranging from sirens that failed to activate to sirens that were broken beyond repair. Bob Segall, Bill Ditton, Gerry Lanosga, Holly Stephen, WTHR-Indianapolis (2006)

Tipsheets

- **No. 1232:** "The Best Disaster Web sites," Bob Williams, *The News and Observer*. From the National Climate Data Center to the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado, Williams describes the most useful Web sites when covering any type of disaster.
- **No. 2612:** "CAR for covering natural disasters," John Maines, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. Maines details the paper's CAR efforts – both successful and unsuccessful – in the days following Hurricane Wilma in 2005. Tipsheet No. 2613, also by Maines, provides suggestions for using CAR with coverage of FEMA's Individuals & Households Program.
- **No. 2709:** "Investigating the Aftermath of Disasters," Sally Kestin, *South*

*Florida Sun-Sentinel*. Kestin provides an overview of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and suggestions for stories and sources following a natural disaster.

Data

- **SBA Disaster Loans** – The Small Business Administration is a big player in assisting the owners of homes and businesses after a declared disaster. The data include loans since 1980 and are current through 2007. The database includes such information as the individuals' name or company name, the mailing address, a code for the type of disaster that occurred, the date the disaster loan was approved for an SBA guarantee, the amount of the loan, and, for businesses, whether the loan was fully paid or charged off (went bad). The main table contains more than 750,000 records.
- **Storm Events Database** – From deadline to enterprise, the database of storm events can provide punch to weather stories. It's the official U.S. government database of storm events around the country and covers 1950 through December 2007. In addition to assisting coverage of disasters on deadline, the database can yield enterprise stories, such as determining the most costly weather events to have hit an area. With the latitudes and longitudes, mapping some of the data is also possible. For additional databases, stories and tipsheets, visit the "Severe Weather Resources: Storms, Flooding and Tornadoes" Web page at [www.ire.org/inthe-news\\_archive/floods.html#data](http://www.ire.org/inthe-news_archive/floods.html#data).



# YOU INVENT IT. WE FUND IT. \$25 MILLION.

The Knight News Challenge, a contest by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has earmarked \$25 million over five years for digital innovation in community news.

As much as \$5 million will be given away this year to support smart, innovative solutions to inform and inspire communities. Projects can range from community databases to tools that help add people to the local digital conversation. The contest is open to anybody anywhere in the world.

*Two recent News Challenge winners. Read 'em all on the web site.*

## WINNER: DAVID COHN, \$340,000 (2008)



**Who:** David Cohn.

**Project:** Spot Journalism will provide a new way to pay for local investigative reporting by soliciting financial support from the public. Independent journalists and residents will propose stories, and Spot Journalism will use the web to seek “micro-payments” to cover the costs. If enough donors contribute the amount needed, a journalist will be hired to do the reporting.

**On the web:** <http://www.digidave.org>

## BLOG WINNER: RYAN SHOLIN \$15,000 (2008)



**Who:** Ryan Sholin.

**Project:** Reporters working on similar topics will be able to communicate and share ideas using a social networking tool and web site created for this project. The site will indicate how many journalists across the country are working on the same issue, such as declining tax bases or water problems. Reporters then can exchange resources and approaches, or use one another’s communities as examples in their own stories.

**On the web:** <http://www.reportingon.com>

KNIGHT NEWS CHALLENGE

[www.newschallenge.org](http://www.newschallenge.org)

---

## IRE SERVICES

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS AND EDITORS, INC. is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting within the field of journalism. IRE was formed in 1975 with the intent of creating a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas. IRE provides educational services to reporters, editors and others interested in investigative reporting and works to maintain high professional standards.

### Programs and Services:

**IRE RESOURCE CENTER**—A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you're working on. You can search through abstracts of more than 20,000 investigative reporting stories through our Web site.

Contact: Beth Kopine, beth@ire.org, 573-882-3364

**IRE AND NICAR DATABASE LIBRARY**—Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases, and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available on these databases, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.

Contact: Jeremy Milarsky, jeremy@ire.org or 573-882-1982. To order data, call 573-884-7711.

**CAMPAIGN FINANCE INFORMATION CENTER**—Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. It's dedicated to helping journalists uncover the campaign money trail. State campaign finance data is collected from across the nation, cleaned and made available to journalists. A search engine allows reporters to track political cash flow across several states in federal and state races.

Contact: Mark Horvit, mhorvit@ire.org, 573-882-1984

**ON-THE-ROAD TRAINING**—As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conferences and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.

Contact: Mark Horvit, mhorvit@ire.org, 573-882-1984

### Publications

**THE IRE JOURNAL**—Published six times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips. *The Journal* also provides members with the latest news on upcoming events and training opportunities from IRE and NICAR.

Contact: Megan Means, meganm@ire.org, 573-884-2360

**UPLINK**—Electronic newsletter by IRE and NICAR on computer-assisted reporting. *Uplink* stories are written after reporters have had particular success using data to investigate stories. The columns include valuable information on advanced database techniques as well as success stories written by newly trained CAR reporters.

Contact: David Herzog, dherzog@ire.org, 573-882-2127

**REPORTER.ORG**—A collection of Web-based resources for journalists, journalism educators and others. Discounted Web hosting and services such as mailing list management and site development are provided to other nonprofit journalism organizations.

Contact: Mark Horvit, mhorvit@ire.org, 573-882-1984.

### For information on:

**ADVERTISING**—Megan Means, meganm@ire.org, 573-884-2360

**MEMBERSHIP AND SUBSCRIPTIONS**—John Green, jgreen@ire.org, 573-882-2772

**CONFERENCES AND BOOT CAMPS**—Stephanie Sinn, stephanie@ire.org, 573-882-8969

**LISTSERVS**—Amy Johnston, amy@ire.org, 573-884-1444

### Mailing Address:

IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211

**Call  
for  
Entries**

Announcing the

# **Philip Meyer Journalism Award**

Sponsored by



**National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting**

a joint program of IRE and the Missouri School of Journalism

and



John S. and James L.  
Knight Foundation

**the Knight Chair in Journalism**

at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication,  
Arizona State University

**The contest recognizes the best journalism done  
using social science research methods.**

All entries are placed in IRE's Resource Center story library  
so IRE members can learn from others' triumphs and troubles.

**POSTMARK DEADLINE: October 31, 2008**



Sam O'Keefe | IRE and NICAR  
Philip Meyer at the 2008 IRE  
Conference in Miami.



Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.  
Missouri School of Journalism  
138 Neff Annex  
Columbia MO, 65211  
[www.ire.org](http://www.ire.org)