The IRE Journal

FALL 2013

INVESTIGATING THE MILITARY

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Join IRE and NICAR in Baltimore for our annual conference devoted to computer-assisted reporting, Feb. 27 to March 2, 2014 at the Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor.

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Register at:
ire.org/conferences/nicar-2014

Conference Hotel
Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor at Camden Yards
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Baltimore, MD 21201

The room rate is $149 (single/double) plus tax, which is currently 15.5%. The discounted room rate is available until February 7, 2014, or until our room block is full (whichever comes first). Our room block has sold out prior to the deadline the past few years, so make your reservations early. Attendees staying in the IRE block at the Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor at Camden Yards will receive complimentary wireless Internet in their guestrooms during their stay.

If you need to cancel your reservation you must do so by 6 pm the day prior to arrival to avoid any cancellation fees of one night room and tax.

All reservations must be guaranteed by a major credit card or first night's room deposit plus tax.

If you have hotel or general conference questions, please contact Stephanie Sinn, Conference & Events Director, Stephanie@ire.org or 901-286-7549.

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Master Sgt. Andy Dunaway/FLICKR.COM

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Volume 36 | Number 4

The IRE Journal (ISSN0164-7016) is published four times a year by Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc., 141 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211, 573-882-2042. Email: 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

Don't Work Like a Dog

BY MARK HORVIT

I often talk about my dog during training sessions.

Teddy usually comes up when I'm leading a hands-on session in Excel. It's not that he knows how to work with spreadsheets (though now that I think about it, he might; I've never given him the chance). I talk about how, once we establish a pattern, he follows it exactly. Time for bed? Jumps off the couch, heads straight to the front door, goes out and does what he must, runs back in to the laundry room, gets a treat, goes to bed. Every night.

(And just for the record, Teddy is half Chihauhau, half German shepherd. Really. That's not remotely relevant, but if you dwell on it, it will haunt your dreams).

His behavior is not a bad metaphor for the way a computer program like Excel follows rules rigorously and does exactly the same thing every time – whether you want it to or not.

That's mostly fine, for a computer program – we need that rigidity so that we know what will happen when we enter data and press a button.

It's not so great, however, for newsrooms.

One of the biggest problems I find when I visit some news organizations, or talk with journalists who come to our training sessions, is that rigidity to pattern. It can guarantee a long, slow road to irrelevance.

Once upon a time it was an acceptable business model to attract readers or viewers by relying on breaking cop news, press conferences and meetings to fill pages or air time. People needed to know those things had happened, and no one else could tell them about it. The best newsrooms did much more, but that wasn't always reflected on the balance sheet.

We all know that's no longer the case. There are lots of places to learn the latest breaking news out of city hall – increasingly, from city hall itself, via the city's own Twitter account, Facebook page, website or text alerts.

But like Teddy, many news organizations remain locked in the old patterns. The results can be dramatic when newsrooms break out.

Journalists send us work they've done following IRE training. Recent examples include a project that found a third of the employees in a police department had been accused of misconduct, committed felonies or had left under suspicious circumstances; an investigation that uncovered more than $150,000 in food and travel spending by a water district and another that rooted out misuse of money in a sheriff's department.

Getting more, and better, information has always been a fundamental focus of IRE training. The only difference is that now, it's also a business model.

One unanticipated outcome of both the proliferation of nontraditional means of getting news, and cutbacks in the traditional news industry, is that good reporting has become much more important to the bottom line. IRE sees that in the greatly increased interest at the corporate level in many media companies for our training. Our members always knew this was important; now more of those who control the budget also see the value.

That's good, but the next step – reorganizing the newsroom around new priorities – has proved to be a tough sell in many places. If your staff isn't getting bigger – and in most places, it's not – then you have to be willing to reprioritize what your existing team is doing with its time. That can result in some hard decisions, but it is paying off for those newsrooms willing to forgo coverage they once counted on to bring their audience what they want – and need – today. If you consistently have information no one else has, the audience notices.

Old patterns are comforting – it's one of the things I love about my dog. I just don't rely on him for my news.

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

IRE, AAJA announce partnership for conferences

The Asian American Journalists Association and Investigative Reporters & Editors are creating a unique opportunity for members of both organizations to take advantage of the training offered at three national events in 2014: IRE's Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference in Baltimore in late February, IRE's annual conference in San Francisco in June and the AAJA National Convention in Washington, D.C., in August.

Members of each organization can use their existing membership to register for any of these events, meaning AAJA members don't need to purchase IRE memberships, and IRE members won't be required to join AAJA.

"AAJA and IRE have a long tradition of training our members on the latest technology and knowledge needed to excel in their jobs," AAJA President Paul Cheung said. "With this partnership, we will offer our members unparalleled access to three fantastic conferences that focus on improving the quality of journalism across all platforms."

IRE President David Cay Johnston said there are multiple benefits. "Members of both IRE and AAJA will benefit from our new partnership, making not just three conferences available to members of both organizations, but by learning from one another how to do even better quality journalism in these challenging times," Johnston said.

In addition, AAJA is planning to present sessions at the IRE Conference, and IRE will offer training at the AAJA National Convention.

The three conferences drew more than 3,100 attendees from throughout the world in 2013.

Registration for IRE's Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference is underway at IRE.org, and AAJA members can register at bit.ly/1cWUseG.

Registration for the annual AAJA and IRE conferences is open as well. Information on the AAJA conference is available at aaja.org/aaja2014hotel, and details on the IRE Conference in June are coming soon at IRE.org.

For more information, contact AAJA Executive Director Kathy Chow at kathyc@aaja.org or IRE Executive Director Mark Horvit at mark@ire.org.

Sponsor a student for IRE membership

IRE is committed to developing the next generation of investigative reporters by introducing more students to the organization.

To do this, we need your help.

Please consider sponsoring a $25 membership for a student on behalf of your alma mater or college media, or for an intern at your news organization. You don't have to know a current student; we'll take care of that. Unless you prefer to remain anonymous, your name and the institution receiving the membership will be listed on IRE's website.

You can sponsor a student membership in two ways:

1. If you know a specific student you'd like to sponsor, go to bit.ly/1ePHzUP to purchase the membership. The student will receive an email saying you have sponsored his or her membership for one year. If the student already has an active membership, it will be extended for another year.

2. If you don't know a specific student but would like to donate a membership to your alma mater's college newspaper, TV or radio station, go to bit.ly/18m5hUu. IRE will work with j-school officials on campus to find a student match and the student will receive an email saying you have sponsored his or her membership for one year. If you happen to know a professor, adviser or student editor at your chosen organization, you may also list the person's name and email address on the form.

If you decide to sponsor a student, please promote the program through social media. Use the hashtag #SponsorIRE and tweet the link to this page. If you have questions or need assistance, please contact IRE membership coordinator John Green at jgreen@ire.org or 573-882-2772.

To see a list of IRE members who have donated student memberships so far, go to bit.ly/1bgr4jZ.

IRE members win Barlett and Steele Awards from Reynolds Center

Four IRE members were among journalists honored in the seventh annual Barlett & Steele Awards for Investigative Business Journalism. Named for the investigative team of Don Barlett and James Steele, the awards celebrate the best in investigative business journalism. The awards are funded by the Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism.

Kris Hundley of the Tampa Bay Times and **Kendall Taggart** of The Center for Investigative Reporting shared the gold award of $5,000 for their joint project, "America's Worst Charities."

The reporters identified charities that steered as much as 95 percent of donations to boiler-room operations and direct-mail companies, leaving only a token amount to help those in need. They assembled interactive databases to help readers examine the worst 50 charities and state enforcement actions against thousands more organizations.

Hundley and Taggart discussed the details of this investigation in a Google Hangout with IRE and spoke at the 2013 IRE Conference in San Antonio. Watch the hangout at bit.ly/1hDbkwj.

Susan Pulliam and **Rob Barry** with colleagues Michael Siconolfi and Jean Eaglesham of The Wall Street Journal, received the $1,000 bronze award for "Inside Game: How Corporate Insiders Profit Ahead of the Public." More than six months went into creating a database to examine how more than 20,000 corporate executives traded their own companies' stock over the course of eight years. It revealed that more than 1,000 executives had generated big profits or avoided big losses. The FBI and Securities and Exchange Commission launched investigations the day after the initial article.

Louise Story of The New York Times received the silver award for the series "United States of Subsidies."

McKim joins New England Center for Investigative Reporting

Jennifer McKim has moved to The New England Center for Investigative Reporting as assistant managing editor and senior investigative reporter.

McKim most recently worked as a social issues and business reporter at The Boston Globe, where she received a 2011 Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism for a story on domestic sex trafficking of minors. She also worked on the investigative team at the Orange County Register in California, where she headed a group of reporters who wrote about lead-tainted imported Mexican candies. The project was nominated as a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize in Public Service.

Please submit Member News items at ire.org/publications/ire-journal/member-news/submit-membernews. Read updates online at ire.org/publications/ire-journal/member-news.

Dangerous Confinement

Violence at mental hospital causes injuries, staffing problems

By Dave Biscobing and Mark LaMet
KNXV-Phoenix

At 4:39 a.m. on a Tuesday, we got an anonymous email:

"I would like for you to please look into the cuts that the Arizona State Hospital (CEO) is making to the Hospital. He has cut our security department by 2/3's we had an escape last year ending in a female's death."

The tip was true, and it wasn't just a death. It was a murder.

While on the run for three months, an escaped patient with severe mental illness brutally killed an innocent woman, slitting her throat and mutilating her body. It was the tragic result of a broken system that should treat and protect the mentally ill in our communities as well as protect the public.

That email was sent last year. Ever since, we've been investigating safety and security at the Arizona State Hospital, the state's only public behavioral health facility.

In a series of reports, we've exposed a place so dangerous that one national expert told us, "The situation is a disaster. (It's) a terrifying, frightening, humiliating, embarrassing, uncomfortable, dangerous disaster."

The Arizona State Hospital, or ASH, treats roughly 230 patients. It's Arizona's last resort for the severely mentally ill and those found "guilty except insane."

As at many state-run behavioral health facilities, none of the patients at ASH are there voluntarily. Almost all have been sent to the hospital by court order for treatment or have been found incompetent to stand trial. It's vital that the patients receive adequate care and treatment because all of them will someday be released

So far, we've aired roughly a dozen stories that have focused on a lack of safety and security inside the hospital. Our first report found that in just three years, there had been 18 escapes, including four patients who have never been found. The morning after we broke the story, another patient escaped.

A few months later, we broke another series of stories about the extreme level of violence at the facility. From June 2012 through June 2013, patients committed 855 assaults, leaving patients and staff with serious and sometimes permanent injuries. Hospital staff were injured so frequently and severely that they missed thousands of hours of work every year, records show.

KNXV-Phoenix

So far, we've aired roughly a dozen stories that have focused on a lack of safety and security inside the hospital.

Despite the escapes and the violence, hospital administrators have continued to cut into security.

The dangerous environment includes high rates of turnover and a shortage of staff, which has had an impact on patient care. Former and current employees say patients aren't getting the help, treatment or attention they need.

One patient who was supposed to receive supervision around the clock died this year. The man, in his early 20s, swallowed multiple dangerous objects. His autopsy showed he had developed a severe internal infection. He was known as a one-to-one patient, meaning he was required to be watched by staff 24 hours a day. The hospital has declined to answer specific questions about what happened to the patient, citing privacy laws and potential legal action. The patient's mother has hired an attorney and plans to file a lawsuit against the state.

Not surprisingly, very little of this had been reported before our investigation. ASH and other mental health facilities across the country often operate with little or no public scrutiny. Hospitals are also shielded by strong

privacy laws, like the 1996 federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA, which limit the availability of information to the media. Health care workers can also be reluctant to speak with reporters because divulging protected information could cost them their jobs and licenses.

Despite privacy laws, records and data are available for public behavioral health facilities. Here are things we obtained from ASH through public record requests:

- A log of critical incidents. The hospital kept logs of what it considered critical incidents, and those logs provided us with basic information about escapes, alleged sex assaults, serious injuries and other significant events.
- Incident reports. In addition to logs, we asked for all reports related to those critical incidents. Although some of the reports were heavily redacted, we were still able to piece together what was going on at the hospital.
- Legal complaints (notices of claims, lawsuits).
- Workers' compensation claims. Whenever employees get hurt on the job at the hospital, they can file claims. These provided us with the dates and times of workplace injuries along with descriptions of what had whappened.
- Internal emails and memorandums. We requested communications from hospital officials. In one email, the hospital CEO asked staff, "Have we fully evaluated the options available to us prior to filing a police report?" (Asked about the email, the hospital CEO said he was making sure all options had been considered and leaving the decision up to his staff.)
- Hospital policies and procedures.
- Internal investigations.
- A database of employees' paid time off due to injuries. Using this data, we determined that hospital workers missed an average of 10,000 hours of work a year due to injuries.
- Data and statistics for assaults, restraints and seclusions.

In addition to hospital records, we obtained documents from other sources:

- Federal reports. Inspectors with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the agency tasked with overseeing behavioral health centers, often conduct surveys at behavioral health facilities. Their survey reports often contain violations, problems and other concerns. Those reports can be a great place to start or to help back up your findings.

See the stories at bit.ly/13NifvN.

KNXV-Phoenix

Hospital surveillance video caught a violent attack in the hospital. According to state records there were more than 850 assaults in one 12-month period.

Hospital staff were injured so frequently and severely that they missed thousands of hours of work every year, records show.

- Police and Fire department records. We also sought records from the Phoenix Police and Fire departments for their calls for service at the hospital. We followed up and asked for their final reports and any surveillance video taken from their calls. The hospital has refused to turn over surveillance video, citing privacy laws. But we obtained video from the police that allowed us to give the public a rare look at the violence inside the hospital.

Even with all of the records we've obtained, our best sources of information have been people inside the hospital. We spent months developing sources. More than a year into our investigation, we have spoken to dozens of sources, including current and past employees, patients and other insiders.

After our stories, ASH added security measures and temporary workers. A few weeks after our first report, the hospital held special drills for the first time to train staff about how to prevent and respond to escapes. A source also told us that the temporary workers were brought in to "watch the halls until attention goes away" from our stories.

A top Arizona lawmaker also promised to take a deeper look at what's happening at the hospital. When the legislative session opens next year, the representative said he may hold hearings because of our investigation.

The federal government is also taking a closer look. Inspectors with the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services visited ASH after our reports.

There's also been push back from officials. After we reported on the patient's death, hospital administrators accused us of violating medical privacy laws, and the state health department canceled a large advertising buy for an anti-smoking public service campaign.

If we had never received that early morning email, we may never have learned about the conditions inside the Arizona State Hospital. Now more than a year into our investigation, we believe there's still a lot more investigating to do.

Investigative reporter Dave Biscobing and investigative producer Mark LaMet are members of the ABC15 Investigators at KNXV-Phoenix. They can be reached at dbiscobing@abc15.com and mlamet@abc15.com.

Overt Over-pumping

Reporter finds hundreds of unpunished water violations in rural Minnesota

By Mark Steil
Minnesota Public Radio

I've always enjoyed looking through large piles of data in my job as a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio. My primary beats are the agriculture and energy sectors. I've been on the job 35 years now, and for most of that time a document hunt generally meant one thing: going to an office and watching someone haul out several cardboard boxes stuffed with folders and paper. I'd sit down and go through every page. But over the past decade, much of that information has moved online. I got a good reminder of that in January when I was on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) website looking through water permit information.

The story that lead me to the DNR web page was the 2012 drought in Minnesota. Day after hot day brought the kind of dryness that makes you lick your lips to moisten them when you're outside. I covered some of the obvious angles: wells going dry, river levels dropping, crops suffering. After a few of these, I got a much better sense of the importance of water in Minnesota. Sure, the state is water-rich compared to other parts of the country, 10,000 lakes and all that. But supply can still become an issue in certain parts of the state. So along with the obvious drought stories, I started looking at overall state water policy. How it works, who oversees the regulatory side, how much water people can legally pump, things like that. It turned out that in Minnesota anyone who wants to pump large amounts of water has to deal with the DNR. The DNR issues permits that authorize the holders to take a set amount of water annually from public lakes, streams and underground aquifers.

Once I understood how the system worked, I looked for information about permit holders and how much water each was allotted. My hope was that if I could identify areas of heavy water use, I could look into whether that usage, combined with drought impact, was causing any water shortages.

The first document I opened on the DNR's website was a big PDF file. I started scrolling through the data and almost right away something caught my eye. The numbers didn't look right. They appeared to show dozens of violations of state water laws. It seemed too easy. I thought I must be missing something. The same information was in a spreadsheet on the DNR site. I downloaded that. When I finished going through it, I was surprised to find out that my first impression not only still seemed to be true, but it was getting stronger. That basic finding held right through several weeks of reporting, interviews and writing. How often does that happen?

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The spreadsheet I downloaded had thousands of entries. It contained records on every water permit issued in the Minnesota since the program began in the 1930s. As I went through the information, I concentrated on a cluster of columns that showed two things: the annual pumping limit for each permit and the actual number of gallons pumped. It didn't take long to find examples of permit holders who had pumped more than their allotment. Those first few turned into dozens, and finally, hundreds. Hundreds of cases where individuals, businesses, schools, churches and even the DNR itself had over-pumped their water appropriations permits.

Those first few turned into dozens, and finally, hundreds. Hundreds of cases where individuals, businesses, schools, churches and even the DNR itself had over-pumped their water appropriations permits.

I checked state law and found that permit over-pumping was a misdemeanor. Sure, they were small crimes, but here you had hundreds of instances of provable violations staring out at you. Many went on year after year.

Finding the worst violators

Using spreadsheets, it was possible to quickly sort the data by different categories. I had worked with spreadsheets before, but I had never really understood why some people thought they were so great. Looking back, what I had missed was that because spreadsheets are put together by computer, they could also be broken down and analyzed by computer. MPR's news director, Mike Edgerly, has really pushed us to jump into the spreadsheet world, to make it a regular part of our reporting. I had dabbled in it, but I got a kick-start last November when I went to an IRE workshop. All of this came in handy when I landed in the water permit story. With the help of my editor, Bill Catlin, we went through the data. One really valuable thing Bill did was to sort the data and find the biggest violators. I took the top dozen or so over-pumpers and went to work on finding out everything I could about them. I had a contact in the DNR who early on had briefed me about the permit system and how it worked. I went back to him on the question of the top violators and what information I could get on them. He told me the DNR has files on each water permit holder. I asked if those files were public record, and he said they were. I thought, I'll have to go to the DNR Central Office in St. Paul to see the files. That would be time-consuming for me because that office building is about 200 miles away. But the DNR guy was really helpful. He offered to scan the contents of each water permit file and load the information on a disc. My editor then picked up the discs at the DNR building and uploaded the files to a shared MPR work space. I downloaded the files from there. This took a few steps over several days

to accomplish, but it was still much better than spending a whole day or more on a trip to St. Paul.

Interviewing over-pumpers and the DNR

When I got the actual files, the first thing that jumped out at me was that the permit over-pumping had been going on for even longer than I thought. One permit holder, a tree/plant nursery, had over-pumped their permit almost every year for two decades. A steel plant was taking as much as five times its permitted annual allotment. I contacted some of these people, but no one would talk on the record about why they weren't following the requirements of their permit. Off the record, I found that many didn't really understand what the permit required them to do. That didn't excuse their actions, but in my mind it sent the issue back to the DNR. It was obvious there was a problem with permit over-pumping. Had the DNR done anything to curb the practice?

> Sure, they were small crimes, but here you had hundreds of instances of provable violations staring out at you.

The answer was almost a total "no." I expected to see at least DNR letters in the permit files warning the violators to get in line. There were maybe a couple, but that was it. When I interviewed the DNR employee who oversaw enforcement, he was candid. Over-pumping was not a major concern, he said. The most important thing for the DNR, he said, was to collect the money permit holders paid the state each year for the water they appropriated. Plus, he said the DNR didn't have enough staff to track the over-pumpers. As for criminal penalties, he said the DNR never pursued that path because in their judgment, the prosecution of the cases would be too expensive when compared to the relatively small penalties a violator would be assessed.Will any of this change in the future? The DNR says it will do a better job in the years ahead. They'll have more computer power soon to track over-pumping. The DNR officials are betting on that to help them get a better handle on the problem. But they still didn't say if they would go back to the people over-pumping and get them to change their behavior.

Doing this story in your area

Looking back on this story, I think my basic approach would work for other reporters. The big step is to actively search, on every story, for large packages of information. They may come as spreadsheets, PDFs, or some other format. It's easy to get discouraged because you may feel you don't have the skills needed to analyze these large sources of information correctly. There may be thousands, or even tens of thousands of individual entries. But my approach is to figure out later what to do with the data. The critical first step is acquisition. Get the information in your hands. Get the data. Once you have it, then you can worry about what to do with it. Put another way, without the data you have zero chance of unlocking whatever stories the information may hold. With the data, even it takes a while, you're at least in position to take your best shot at finding something good.

Mark Steil, based in Worthington, Minn., covers major changes in the economy and society in rural areas for Minnesota Public Radio and has worked for MPR since 1978.

INVESTIGATING THE MILITARY

Questionable spending.
Forgotten veterans.
Sexual abuse in the ranks.

For journalists examining the military, there are many key issues that must be explored, even as the institutions themselves can be difficult to cover.

Master Sgt. Andy Dunaway/FLICKR.COM

SHIP SHAPE?

Investigation finds major flaws in new Navy ships

BY MIKE FABEY // AVIATION WEEK

The instructions from my editor Jeff Morris were succinct and clear. In no way was I to misrepresent myself. Nor was I to break any laws. If asked, I was to provide identification and further acknowledge that I was an Aviation Week reporter working on a story.

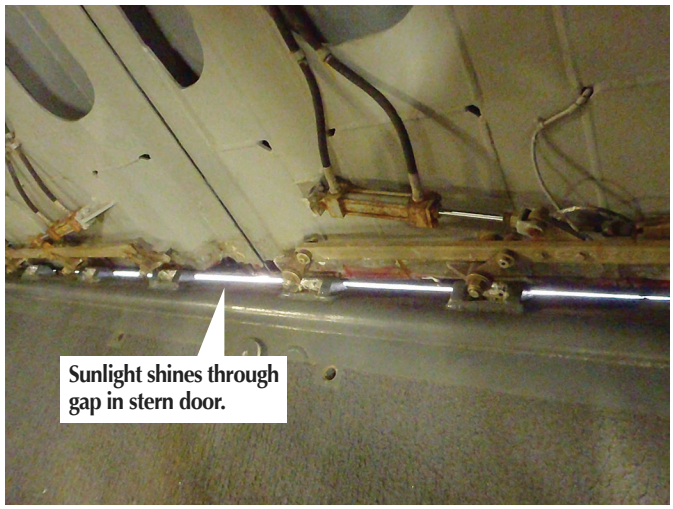
Still, as I took my not-officially-sanctioned tour of the U.S. Navy's newest warship at Naval Base San Diego and moved about the ship, which was guarded by highly trained and heavily armed military security, I felt more than a twinge of concern in my gut. And as I took out my camera to photograph some of the most egregious examples of shoddy shipbuilding, my stomach began to knot. If I was caught, trespassing could be the least of my worries. I had been warned the Navy could try to charge me with Espionage Act violations.

But we felt we had no choice but to take such a risk. For months, Navy officials had not only been denying our source-backed stories that reported major problems with the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS-1) USS Freedom, but also had been attempting to impugn Aviation Week's reputation in Congress and defense circles. The only way to prove our stories about the ship's problems was to go aboard and see for ourselves.

If the ship was a rusted, rotting and broken mess in critical areas, as our sourcing and stories indicated, then not only was the LCS fleet development suspect, but putting such a vessel to sea in that condition could place sailors' lives in danger. The ends justified the risk.

By 2030 about a quarter of the total Navy surface fleet will be made up of sparsely manned LCS vessels, the direct offspring of the 1990s Streetfighter concept of "expendable" high-speed combat ships meant to race close to shorelines with specially built and supposedly interchangeable modules packed with equipment and personnel berths for antisubmarine, surface and countermine warfare operations.

The Congressional Research Service estimated in 2005 that



Michael Fabey | Aviation Week Photos

A stern door that is supposed to be watertight had a gap extending its entire length that would allow tons of water to pour in when the ship was at high speeds. Aviation Week's reporting led to a congressional inquiry into the Navy's Littoral Combat Ship program. The Navy spent $42 million for repairs to the USS Freedom.

30 to 60 LCS vessels would cost between $7.5 billion and $15 billion, based on Navy price projections. The Pentagon now expects to pay about $40 billion for 52 ships.

Meanwhile, as the Government Accountability Office noted in a July 2013 report, the Navy's estimates for LCS total life cycle costs of all ships have ranged from about $108 billion to about $170 billion. Navy program officials have acknowledged they really do not know now how much it will cost to operate these ships, and they will not know until the end of the decade at the earliest.

Covering such a costly and important defense program well requires all the guts, guile and skill a reporter can muster. You

Michael Fabey | Aviation Week Photos

Aviation Week's investigation highlighted problems aboard the ship where vital mission gear would be stored to be deployed from the vessels' helicopter.

need patience, perseverance and the hide of a rhinoceros. You have to read volumes on technology, naval warfare and legislative affairs. You have to gain the expertise and sourcing to pierce the cloak of secrecy that protects military programs from the kind of public scrutiny that usually accompanies multibillion dollar expenditures of taxpayer dollars.

The tale of how I wound up on the Freedom for that risky reporting mission will illustrate what I mean.

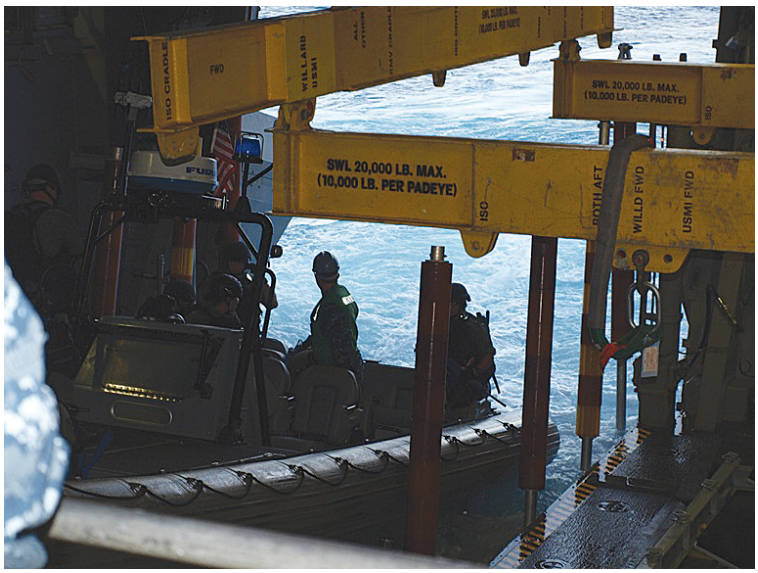
PURSUING A TIP

In the waning days of January 2011, the defense investigators for the Project on Government Oversight asked me to meet with them in a local coffee shop. The oversight group handed over a plain manila envelope packed with classified reports that were too complicated and potentially explosive for POGO to handle on its own. Just a quick scan of the reports revealed they could potentially torpedo the LCS program.

POGO initially came to me with the documents because I was the new naval editor for Aviation Week, with experience investigating defense issues, including Navy shipbuilding problems. POGO acknowledged the documents covered subject matter beyond its expertise and the organization was worried about reporting some of the classified material.

"If I was caught, trespassing could be the least of my worries. I had been warned that the Navy could very well try to charge me with Espionage Act violations."

Careful not to violate classification laws, I briefed the contents of the reports to naval shipbuilding experts, who said they showed the whole ship would have to be redesigned and retested, with proper Navy oversight to make sure the reconstruction was done correctly.



Photos by Michael Fabey | Aviation Week Photos

LEFT: Fabey exposed numerous problems with the USS Freedom, which the Navy and Lockheed Martin initially denied. Eventually, Fabey took an unauthorized tour of the ship and obtained evidence of the flaws. RIGHT: The LCS can launch and recover rigid hull inflatable boats up to 11 meters, or 36 feet, long, a technical and operational challenge.

At the same time, I determined what kind of contractual and programmatic information I might need to better understand the LCS developmental and funding trail. It had become apparent early on in the Obama administration that even the most basic information – the type of material the Pentagon had released before with just a simple verbal or emailed request – would now need to be formally requested under the Freedom of Information Act. And FOIA requests were taking much longer to fulfill than in previous years. I put in an FOIA request then for all contracts and contract modifications related to the LCS ships.

I searched Google, contractor and military websites as well as conference-related materials going back decades for reports, dissertations, doctoral theses and any other material I could find related to LCS development. Meanwhile, we wrote about the findings and reports we had in hand, careful not to disclose details that could unwittingly identify our source or land us in trouble for publishing classified material.

"Saving sailors' lives overrode concerns about legal ramifications or obstructed beat coverage."

The Navy and Lockheed Martin Corp. attacked us over the initial pieces – not on the basis of their accuracy, but over our refusal to specifically identify the reports and our reliance, in their view, on material they called "outdated." However, the material had never been published, and it directly contradicted their assurances that the issues identified in the reports did not indicate more serious ship or programmatic problems.

Still, Navy and Lockheed officials said the ship was in fine shape, and refused to answer further questions. Our confidential source said the ship was in horrible condition.

LOOKING FOR PROOF

Someone was lying. The only way to truly ascertain who was telling the truth was to see it firsthand. I flew from D.C. to San Diego, where the Freedom was dry-docked, and went onboard the vessel for a guided tour. To better prepare for the tour, I read a small library of books and reports about the Freedom, the LCS fleet development and related issues. I also beat the pavement in and around the Pentagon and Beltway to find sources intimately familiar with the program and ship development. And I met with former Navy officials, congressional attorneys, Defense Department attorneys and other legal experts to see what lines I could and could not cross.

Problems aboard the Freedom highlighted by a source intimately aware of the ship and the program could be seen during the tour of the vessel. The tour yielded evidence of the ship's shortcomings and the misrepresentations on the part of the Navy and Lockheed. I now had enough material to disprove the assertions of the service and contractor. Still, Aviation Week faced several serious questions about how to proceed. Accessing and photographing certain areas of the ships – let alone publishing pictures or information connected to those sections – could be considered violations of the Espionage Act. Furthermore, publishing some of the material or describing how we gained access to the ship could jeopardize our source. And even raising the questions about what was observed during the ship tour would sever my relationship with major elements within the Navy and Lockheed, severely hampering my ability to cover my beat.

But saving sailors' lives overrode concerns about legal ramifications or obstructed beat coverage. We compiled a spreadsheet of our observations and several pages of questions

TIPS FOR COVERING THE BIG MILITARY STORY

BY MIKE FABEY // AVIATION WEEK

- **Know your material.** While this is good advice for anyone working a major story on any beat, it is particularly important when covering military matters, which can mean writing about the most modern technology and arcane programmatic procedures while battling a nearly tribal sense of protection. Cast your research net as wide as possible and interview as many as you can from all ranks. Keep in mind that while the sailors and privates may have the best information, often it can take an admiral or a general to gain access.
- **As early as possible, determine what kind of information will require a Freedom of Information Act request.** Be prepared – you will probably need to file a FOIA more often than you might think, especially with the current administration. File as soon as you can and be prepared to wait and get heavily redacted responses.
- **Do not underestimate the lengths the military organizations will go to stop a story** or line of inquiry, or to taint the reputation of a reporter or publication working on material they do not want to be made public. Same goes for many top contractors.
- **Tape everything and save every email or other bit of correspondence.** Take digital photos as much as possible – not only to back up your reporting, but also to bolster it. Photos can be like notes and they can capture things that you failed to notice. Make sure your camera has a document setting – it's nearly as good as a copy machine.
- **Invest in a good pair of boots and a sturdy rucksack or something similar.** When you get aboard a ship, helicopter or tank, you want to make sure your camera, recorder and other belongings remain protected and by your side.
- **Make sure you have the backing of your organization.**
- **Build a network of experts on government/military legal matters**, and do not be shy about using them to determine the legal soundness of reporting and publishing controversial material. A good public affairs officer can also be of help, but use only one you can trust.
- **Determine what kind of data could be of help for your reporting and find any database with that information.** The military, like many government organizations, loves to keep data about everything from contracting to operations. While others can do the analysis for you, it's a better idea to learn to do your own analysis – others without military knowledge could miss something.
- **Be prepared to get up and out** – the best military reporting is done from the field. Never turn down an embed or an embark.
- **Carry a USB with significant free space** – you never know when a source can and will copy some files for you.
- **Do not fear off-the-record backgrounders** – military folks like these types of interviews, especially when they're getting to know reporters or they're talking about controversial matters. Most of the time you can get them to go on the record.
- **Treat public affairs officers as you would the front desk folks in any municipal cop shop.** Bring them donuts or Starbucks. Meet them for coffee, lunch, drinks – whatever. They are the initial gatekeepers and a good working relationship will carry you through the tough times, which will come quite often on a beat like this.
- **Do not be surprised when public affairs officers tell you they don't or didn't know something** and/or it may take a long time to find out. They are often speaking the truth.
- **Remember that the careers of officers are often married to their acquisition programs –** they will rise or fall depending on how the program performs under their watch.
- **Get on the email lists for services' newsfeeds**, Facebook pages, Twitter pages, inspector general reports, GAO reports, etc. You will get inundated with material, but you have to learn to glance at each at least every other day to discern if there are any tips worth pursuing.
- **Be prepared for some slow going for the bigger stories.** This is a beat of puzzles and sometimes the pieces are quite difficult to find, requiring several interviews just to find or confirm the smallest bit of intelligence.
- **If you have not yet developed a solid organization system for reports, tips, subjects, chronologies – develop one.** Now. This is one beat that can overwhelm and it's easy find yourself in a quicksand of material.
- **Learn to think strategically.** Often it is quite easy to get an immediate scoop on a story or subject, but running the big article early could ruin chances for a larger story that puts things in greater context. Only by learning the beat and developing trustworthy sources can you truly decide whether to strike soon or wait.

arising from the tour and related reporting. The Navy's response was quick and sharp. Service officials threatened me with prosecution for boarding the ship and taking or publishing the photos. The Navy also refused to talk to me, instead raising concerns with my editors, and sometimes even suggesting that I never boarded the ship and was fabricating material.

I shared some of the pictures and other material with congressional staffers and investigators as well as certain defense analysts and others connected with the LCS program to elicit comment and insight and get some traction and action on the Hill. Shortly after the story and pictures from the tour ran, the House passed legislation calling for an investigation into the Freedom issues.

While the Navy made good on its promise to shut me out of stories and interviews on LCS and other major programs, I followed up with more articles about additional problems with the Freedom fleet, including dubious ship-testing and an effort by top Navy officials to hide negative ship-test results from Congress, which ensured the nation kept developing the ship and buying its successors.

The Navy and Lockheed tried to convince lawmakers that Aviation Week had invented the stories or was using material that was years old rather than weeks old. To counter these charges, Aviation Week ran further pictures and story details that better identified the time frame of the tour, without releasing any information that would compromise our source or put me in further legal jeopardy. Again, great pains were taken to run pictures that did not show any ship spaces that could be considered secret.

SEEING RESULTS

In the end, not only did the Navy retreat from its promise to bring charges against me, but the service brass started to acknowledge the veracity of the Aviation Week stories. Solving the ship's problems identified in the reports became a priority for the Navy, and the service created a unique panel of top admirals to fix the ship and the program.

Aviation Week had become "the voice of the opposition" for LCS detractors, especially those in Congress, Navy officials told me. Our solid reporting had not only exposed the problems with the ship and program, but also diluted the Navy's credibility, especially in D.C.

Most surprising of all, the Navy offered to bring me back aboard the ship – this time as its guest – for a rare embark during crew certification trials off the San Diego coast for its Western Pacific deployment to Singapore.

Again, I needed to do more research. I analyzed contracting data provided by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting to get a funding profile for the LCS program and married that with other findings from my previous reporting, along with new material. I also received some of the FOIA material and was able to paint a strong financial picture of the shipbuilding and development effort.

One of the records we found was a report of LCS shortcomings, including major concerns about sailor safety and the potential for deadly accidents. In all, our reporting found the ship had generator problems that had caused it to lose all power – to go dark – while at sea. A stern door designed to be watertight had a gap so large it allowed 17 tons of water to pour through when the ship ran at high speed (one of the ship's defining characteristics), causing steering problems. Leaks throughout critical piping networks had called into question the reliability of firefighting, cooling and other key systems.

"Covering such a costly and important defense program well requires all the guts, guile and skill a reporter can muster. You need patience, perseverance and the hide of a rhinoceros."

I wrote up all of the material, but we held back from running it immediately. Instead, I waited until after going back aboard the Freedom for the trials, and then I put together a narrative based on everything, with a series of related stories we were able to spin out over several weeks. We avoided the sensational, but the firsthand reporting and in-depth research highlighted the program's problems and the Navy's efforts to address them.

Of course, the Navy did not embrace the stark portrayal of the ship and the program – but leading Navy officers associated with the program ultimately felt that we had given them fair coverage and have continued to provide me with exclusive material, interviews and access. In the end, too, the Navy also fixed Freedom, adding $42 million to its growing price, and the ship was able to deploy to Singapore, where the Navy also invited me to visit the ship and interview Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the chief of naval operations.

The accuracy, doggedness and fairness of our reporting eventually forced the Navy – under congressional scrutiny – to abandon its early stonewalling tactics and ultimately give us access and recognition rivaling that of dedicated naval publications to show how the service had fixed the shortcomings we had identified on the ship and in the program.

A journalist for about three decades for a variety of local, national, foreign and international publications, Mike Fabey has landed assignments that have taken him from the sunny shores of Rio to the bowels of a nuclear-powered and armed U.S Navy submarine on patrol in the Atlantic.

He has won about two dozen local, regional and national awards for his work. He lived for stretches in Brazil and Australia, writing for publications based in both countries as well as working as a foreign correspondent for magazines back in the U.S.

Now the naval editor for Penton's Aviation Week, he lives in the Washington, D.C., area with his wife and their daughter and son.

Read the stories at aviationweek.com/lcs.

ABUSES OF POWER

Air Force trainees sexually assaulted, given psychiatric discharges

BY KARISA KING

In December 2011, the U.S. Air Force charged a basic training instructor with sexually preying on 10 recruits at Lackland Air Force Base. About six months after the first case emerged, the Air Force revealed that 12 instructors were suspected of sexually abusing 31 young female trainees, and the numbers were expected to grow.

In anticipation of what was to become the military's worst sexual abuse scandal in the past decade, the San Antonio Express-News, where I was a special projects reporter, assigned me to dig deeper into the story. I had never covered the military, and had zero contacts in what is one of the most notoriously tight-lipped sectors of federal government.

The most glaring questions about the growing scandal centered on whether Lackland officials had failed to spot the sexual misconduct and what cultural factors had fostered the abuse. Lackland commanders were not talking about what had gone wrong at the base, which is home to Air Force basic training and graduates about 36,000 recruits a year.

I requested records under the Freedom of Information Act for all previous cases in which instructors had sexually assaulted or engaged in other illicit conduct with trainees. It took nearly two months to obtain the documents. Our military beat reporter, Sig Christenson, and I teamed up to publish a story that exposed persistent problems with instructors seeking strictly prohibited sexual relationships with recruits and trainees in technical school. The Air Force bans instructors from sexual or social contact with trainees because it undermines the authority of trainers and opens dangerous opportunities for them to abuse their vastly more powerful positions.

Records showed that from 2002 to 2011, 24 instructors faced administrative or criminal charges stemming from illicit conduct with trainees. While several of the cases went to court-martial, most were handled in private administrative hearings, which shielded the names of instructors, the details of the accusations and whether any of the sexual contact was unwanted.

The numbers shed light on how commanders often deal with sexual misconduct as a private matter, a practice that has no parallel in the civilian criminal justice system. The records also raised questions that extended beyond Lackland about the power of military commanders, who are not legally trained but decide how sexual assault accusations are handled and can unilaterally throw out jury convictions and reduce sentences. Under the guidance of Express-News Project Editor David Sheppard, we sought to expand our investigation and look more closely at the military criminal justice system.

TALKING WITH VICTIMS

My first task was to connect with victims. But from the start, victims' advocates warned that survivors would not come forward because it takes years, if not decades, to overcome the ordeal of sexual assault in the military, a setting that often retraumatizes victims. From the previous FOIA request, we knew that even in cases that had gone to courts-martial, none of the documents identified victims.

I was still searching for sources when the mother of a young Army technical student at Goodfellow Air Force Base in Texas reached out to me because of our Lackland coverage. Her daughter was fighting a pending discharge from the service after reporting that she had been sexually assaulted and being subsequently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her story seemed tragic, and almost too incredible to believe. I was still wrestling with how to handle her case when I began to have more success locating victims through nonmilitary sources.

The most helpful were nonprofit groups that interacted with survivors, such as victims' rights, veterans and legal aid groups that provide assistance to current and former military members. Those groups provided key introductions to victims, who were more comfortable having trusted intermediaries arrange interviews.

After I had interviewed two or three victims, it became apparent that many military sexual assault survivors were connecting to each

other through online forums and other informal support networks, which also provided indispensable introductions.

From the first several interviews, a stark pattern emerged: After reporting sexual assaults, victims said they were mistakenly diagnosed with psychological disorders and ousted from military service. The pattern became the basis for the first story in a three-part series that was published in May, "Twice Betrayed," which documented widespread psychiatric discharges for sexual assault victims in every branch of the military.

The accounts of survivors also drove the last two parts of the series, which examined a low prosecution rate for offenders and exposed loopholes in a reform designed to transfer victims who felt threatened after reporting assault.

The most common thread in the narratives told by victims was the lack of punishment for offenders. Many victims said they disclosed the crimes to their superiors, who dismissed their accusations or discouraged them from reporting the allegations to authorities. Documenting their cases and looking for evidence that the problems were systemic became the next hurdles.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OTHER SOURCES

In every case included in the series, victims provided us with military and medical paperwork that showed the dates and reasons for their discharge. Almost all victims had a document called a DD 214, which is a standard form given to military members when they leave active duty.

Victims also provided copies of the complaints they filed with criminal authorities, memos from the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator office and civilian health care paperwork. Many had already obtained the documents as part of their fight to win medical benefits, which they'd been denied as a result of the erroneous psychiatric discharges. In other cases, victims requested the documents after they began working with us.

As a word of warning, the process can take months. In one case, an Army soldier, who had fought for her criminal file for years, received the documents less than a week before we published. She had previously sought the documents with no success. But they finally came through after she filed a FOIA request.

Other key sources helped to fill in the picture.

- The Defense Department's own statistics illustrated much about the underlying dynamics that had fostered an epidemic of sexual assault in the military. Every year, it produces a voluminous report through its Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, which provided statistics on the estimated number of victims and extreme lack of reporting when it comes to sex crimes. The department also released an analysis of a lengthy survey, which is produced every two years. The survey exposed the prevalence of retaliation against victims and why so many avoid reporting, among other things. Other valuable statistics came from the Medical Surveillance Monthly Report, published by the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center. The monthly reports provide statistics on trends in injuries and illness among service members. The center also produces other reports on a range of other health issues confronting the military. So don't forget to look to the Department of Defense's own reports. You might be pleasantly surprised by how many statistics it's already documenting.

After reporting sexual assaults, victims said they were mistakenly diagnosed with psychological disorders and ousted from military service.

- Look for reports from government watchdog agencies that monitor the department, such as the Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office.
- Congressional staffers for lawmakers who serve on Armed Services committees were often very knowledgeable about some of the problems we were investigating because of their work with constituents and victims who sought help from their offices.
- Military court dockets are also public information, and many installations post the cases online. But be careful not to rely solely on the posted dockets, which may not list important evidentiary proceedings, called Article 32 hearings, in which investigating officers weigh evidence from both sides and then make recommendations about whether cases should proceed to court-martial. Those hearings are open and provide a surprisingly thorough preview of what you will see at trial. The most vital witnesses testify, and investigating officers give broad discretion to the attorneys questioning them. So you often hear more information at Article 32 hearings than what you get at the court-martial. You don't want to miss those hearings.
- If you didn't catch the hearing or you're interested in older cases, the reports from investigating officers who oversee the Article 32 hearings are public and you can obtain them with a FOIA request.
- Special victims counselors are attorneys appointed to represent sex-assault victims as their cases move through the military courts. This new class of attorneys, called SVCs, is not subject to rules that prohibit military defense and prosecution lawyers from speaking to the media. Yet SVCs are fully versed in the details of cases and can serve as intermediaries for victims, or speak on their behalf. The Air Force created the SVC pilot program in January 2013 and is expected to expand it to the rest of the other military branches.
- Other good sources can be found in military retirees, who often remain deeply involved in Defense Department matters and are free to speak publicly.
- Don't discount military publications such as Stars and Stripes and the Gannett newspapers Air Force Times and Army Times. These outlets cover cases that often don't get attention in mainstream media. When a general at Aviano Air Base in Italy tossed out a jury's sexual assault conviction against a pilot, the case became a national scandal. The Air Force Times had covered the trial in daily detail, and their coverage was invaluable after the case ignited controversy.

Karisa King is an investigative reporter at the Chicago Tribune. She previously worked at the San Antonio Express-News, which published the series "Twice Betrayed." She began working at the newspaper in 1999. After four years of covering criminal justice issues, she joined the special projects team, where she won numerous awards, including Texas Reporter of the Year.

View the articles and video at mysanantonio.com/twice-betrayed.

FRIENDLY FIRE

Post-9/11 veterans fight on new fronts at home

BY JACQUEE PETCHEL // ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY / NEWS21

Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 2.6 million veterans have returned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a country largely unprepared to meet their needs and a government that has failed on multiple levels to fulfill the obligations demanded by Congress and promised by both Republican and Democratic administrations. This summarizes the overarching findings detailed in a national News21 investigation, a project reported and executed by 26 student journalists from 12 universities across the country.

"Back Home: The Enduring Battles Facing Post-9/11 Veterans" (backhome.news21.com) documented an array of problems, including bonuses paid to disability claims processors as veterans waited months for money, a veterans' suicide rate of two (in some cases, three) times the civilian rate, millions of dollars spent on questionable programs, some veterans charities preying on Americans' military sentiments and a plague of female veterans, some sexually assaulted, feeling disenfranchised by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

News21 students traveled the country talking to veterans who had survived Taliban and al-Qaida attacks, roadside bombs, mortar fire and the deaths of fellow soldiers, yet when interviewed, said they had returned home to a future threatened by poverty, unemployment, homelessness and suicide. "The hardest thing you can ever do isn't joining the military," said 30-year-old Luis Duran, a New Yorker who had entered the Marine Corps after 9/11, deployed to Iraq and survived a suicide bomb. "The most difficult part is getting out."

The idea for the project came from Leonard Downie Jr., former executive editor of The Washington Post and Weil Family Professor of Journalism at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. He chose the treatment of post-9/11 veterans because in his words, "it was so timely, and we knew that no other news organization could match the number of journalists we could assign to investigate it in such depth and tell the resulting stories in so many forms." (Downie is also a member of IRE's board of directors).

Jessica Wilde | News21

U.S. Army veteran Jerral Hancock drove over an IED in Iraq in 2007. He lost his arm and the use of both legs, and now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the months before the students arrived at the ASU newsroom, Downie taught them a semester-long, video-conferenced seminar, inviting on-the-record guest speakers to class and assigning investigative research topics to the students.

"We wanted our students to hold accountable the government agencies and private groups that were failing to provide the returning veterans what they need and deserve to restart their lives back home after serving their country so selflessly," Downie explained.

Following the seminar, the students worked at the Cronkite School for 10 weeks over the summer, which I directed, as executive editor. By the end of those weeks, the News21 fellows had traveled to more than 60 cities and 20 states, conducted hundreds of interviews and reviewed tens of thousands of public records and government reports. One mandate of the project was to create a multimedia experience that would engage readers. All told, the students produced some 26 stories, 12 videos, 13 interactive graphics, 26 photo galleries and a

Peter Haden | News21

Spc. Ian Placek receives information about education benefits during a reintegration event for the 818th Engineer Company in Bismarck, N.D., June 8.

23-minute documentary. The website also was designed by students, (principally by University of Maryland graduate Greg Kohn).

BONUSES DESPITE BACKLOG

Data analysis also was a central component of several stories. For example, the News21 investigation found that as the lengthy backlog of delayed and mishandled claims had begun to surge dramatically in 2011, more than two-thirds of the country's VA claims processors had collected $5.5 million in bonuses. Claims workers had been effectively encouraged, based on a performance "credit system," to process less-complex claims first, leaving to languish those claims involving multiple war injuries and missing paperwork.

Complex claims, the workers told us, required calling and sending follow-up letters to veterans and requesting federal documents and medical records, all of which received zero points based on the Veterans Benefits Administration's performance evaluation for processors at the time.

For the bonus data, the team had scraped publicly available federal salary data for baseline analysis until FOIA requests to the Office of Personnel Management were fulfilled. The data was then analyzed for a number of trends, including bonuses doled out to claims examiners. The backlog data was pulled from the Veterans Benefits Administration annual reports and publicly available weekly reports.

The team (ASU's Mary Shinn, University of Missouri's Steven Rich and Kent State University's Daniel Moore) then compared the data by year to the backlog of disability claims. They spent weeks calling every local union associated with VA claims processors to find those willing to talk. We found one current worker who agreed to speak on the record only because she was close to retirement. We found more than a dozen others who agreed to speak on background or off-the-record.

SURGE IN SUICIDES

One of the project's most ambitious public records efforts was to gather, organize and analyze all reported veterans' suicides, using mortality records from every state in the nation. This involved eight months of wrangling with state health departments, many of which had never fully tallied veterans' deaths. Four reporters (Bonnie Campo and Chase Cook of the University of Oklahoma, Forrest Burnson of the University of Texas and Jeff Hargarten of the University of Minnesota) started making requests in January. The veteran suicides were tabulated and analyzed using military status on death certificates, some from electronic records while others had to be counted by hand.

Records from the states showed the annual suicide rate among veterans is about 30 for every 100,000 of the population, compared to a civilian rate of about 14 per 100,000. The suicide rate among veterans had increased an average 2.6 percent a year from 2005 to 2011, or more than double that of the 1.1 percent civilian

rate, according to News21's analysis of states' mortality data. In Arizona, the suicide rate was 43.9 per 100,000 people, more than three times the civilian suicide rate.

MANY MORE BATTLES

Though post-9/11 veterans use the VA more than other veterans, no government agency had fully calculated the lifetime cost of health care for the large number of men and women with life-lasting wounds, according to a review of thousands of pages of Congressional Budget Office reports and other government documents. But it was certain to steadily escalate because of the veterans' higher survival rates, longer tours of duty and extensive injuries, plus the anticipated cost of reducing wait times for medical appointments and reaching veterans in rural areas. This story (by Jessica Wilde of the University of Maryland) was told in both words and through powerful on-camera accounts from veterans with multiple amputations.

Even so, our investigation showed, the VA and the Department of Defense had spent at least $1.3 billion over the last four years trying unsuccessfully to develop a single electronic-health-records system between the two departments. This failed effort, as documented by years of federal budget reports and other records, had left veterans' health records, which are critical to their disability claims, literally piled up in paper files across the country (by the University of Florida's Hannah Winston).

All of these issues had resulted in other collateral consequences, such as homelessness (as documented by Catey Traylor of Central Michigan University and ASU's Peter Hayden), not to mention post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries (by ASU's Trahern Wallace Jones) and a dramatic rise in hearing loss (by ASU's Kay Temple). A News21 documentary (by ASU's Jake Stein and Oklahoma's Bonnie Campo) examined the millions of dollars spent by the VA to research complementary and alternative treatments for veterans seeking help beyond prescription medications for PTSD and other conditions.

The wars also had significantly affected women, who, according to a News21 demographic analysis (by ASU's Mauro Whiteman), made up 17.4 percent of post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. More than a quarter of those women were black, almost twice the proportion found in the entire U.S. population.

Female veterans were less likely to find a job than male veterans and more likely to be a single parent with children to support, interviews and records showed. The challenges confronting female vets had been recounted through the voices of four women in Kent, Ohio (by ASU's Caitlin Cruz, Asha Anchan of the University of Nebraska and Kelsey Hightower of the University of Oklahoma).

OBSTACLES TO FINDING WORK, RECEIVING CHARITY

Among our other findings:

The Post-9/11 GI Bill had paid for nearly 1 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to go to school at a cost of about $30 billion since 2009, but the federal government had yet to document how many of those students had graduated, much less whether they stayed in school (Meg Wagner and Hannah Winston of the University of Florida and Anthony Cave of Florida International University).

Despite laws protecting the civilian jobs of National Guard members and reservists, more than 15,000 troops since 2001 had had to fight for their employment rights through official complaints that had required tedious and sometimes expensive disputes (ASU's Rachel Leingang and Nebraska's Riley Johnson). In addition, even with highly visible efforts by Congress, legislatures, businesses and philanthropists to push jobs initiatives, about 166,000 veterans or nearly 8 percent, had not found work since returning to the civilian work force. A state-by-state survey by News21 also showed that though the Obama administration had prodded states to recognize military experience as sufficient for state licensing – certifying truck drivers, nurses and paramedics, among others – most had so far delayed, forcing veterans to duplicate the training they had received in their military jobs (Johnson and University of Oregon's Colton Totland).

In the years that the country had been at war, Americans had given more than $12 billion to veterans' and military charities. Donations had grown nationwide from more than $615 million in 2001 to more than $1.6 billion in 2011 alone. Federal and state laws demand financial reporting from all charities, but they require little in the way of reporting the results of services the charities claim to provide.

Our investigation found that though many charities had offered needed help, others had spent much of their money – sometimes most of it – on the organization's overhead expenses, rather than services promised to veterans. One, Disabled Veterans Services of Pompano Beach, Fla., had reported raising more than $8 million in cash and nearly $4 million in donated goods that it had claimed would help disabled and homeless veterans. But barely a nickel of each dollar the charity raised in cash had gone directly to help veterans. News21 created a database (by ASU students Chad Garland and Andrew Knochel) of nearly 2,000 organizations based on records from the National Center for Charitable Statistics, or NCCS, and federal tax filings, or 990s, for 2001 through 2011. The number of such charities had more than tripled from just 583 in 2001 to more than 1,900, according to their analysis. More than half of the public's donations – about $6 billion – had gone to just 12 of those charities.

Jacquee Petchel, professor of practice at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication and executive editor of News21, is a longtime investigative reporter, editor and producer in newspapers and broadcast. She previously served as investigations editor at the Houston Chronicle and The Miami Herald (Fla.) and executive producer for investigations at CBS television stations in Minneapolis, Minn., and Miami. She also is a former IRE board member.

ABOUT NEWS21

The project was published online in August and has been carried by more than 50 news organizations and websites across the country, including The Washington Post, Philadelphia Inquirer, NBC News and The Center for Public Integrity.

News21 is supported by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation as well as the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, the Hearst Foundations, Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, Peter Kiewit Foundation of Omaha, Neb., and Women and Philanthropy, part of ASU's Foundation for a New American University.

NO RELIEF

Long waits for disability benefits, faulty health care, leave wounded veterans struggling to get by

BY AARON GLANTZ // THE CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

The war in Iraq is over. President Obama has promised that by the end of next year the large American troop presence in Afghanistan will be gone as well. The country has turned inward, tired of war, and for the most part the media has obliged by helping Americans forget. In July 2007, the Pew Research Center reported that media coverage of the wars represented 15 percent of all news coverage. Since then, the amount of coverage has grown so scant that Pew stopped tracking it.

For the 2.5 million Americans who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is a critical moment. The country will either brush them aside as it did with veterans after the Vietnam War, or it will invest in veterans as it did after World War II, when a quality Veterans Affairs health system and robust GI Bill helped spawn what Tom Brokaw has called the Greatest Generation.

So far, what we see is a little of both. Since President Barack Obama took office in 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget has grown from $98 million to a proposed $152 million for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

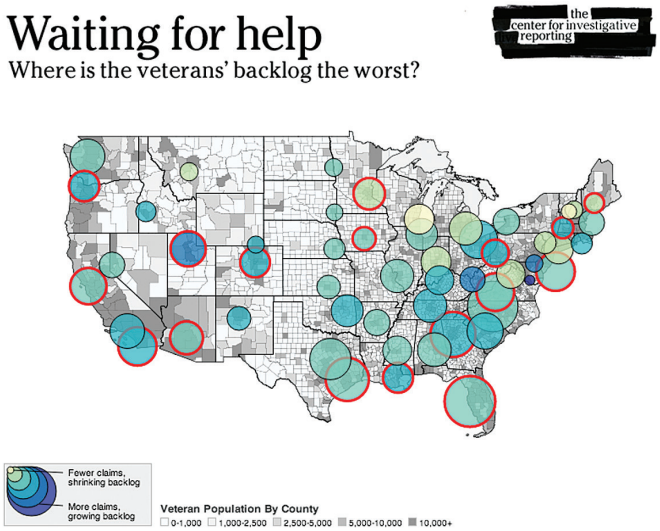
The problem is that this money is not consistently adding up to better care and improved services for veterans, making the VA a rich area for robust watchdog journalism.

Here are two topics The Center for Investigative Reporting has explored during the past year: the backlog of hundreds of thousands of veterans waiting for disability compensation and flaws in a VA health care system that's designed to help veterans recover from war.

THE BACKLOG

In 2007, I got a desperate call from James Eggemeyer, a homeless Iraq war veteran on Florida's Atlantic coast. The 25-year-old former U.S. Army specialist had back and shoulder injuries from his service as well as post-traumatic stress disorder that developed after he carried the dead bodies of two young girls and their mother onto an American helicopter after a convoy accident.

He couldn't work and had been waiting eight months for his VA disability check.



While waiting for the VA, Eggemeyer lost his home. He lost contact with his son. He pawned everything he could: his girlfriend's diamond ring, his guitar, his Xbox video game system and his television. He started sleeping in a 1999 Ford Explorer. Then he crashed the truck. He was in a downward spiral that has become familiar among Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans – one that all too often ends in suicide.

Stories like Eggemeyer's already were being covered by the media in 2008, when presidential candidate Obama promised to revamp a "broken VA bureaucracy" and streamline delays veterans faced before receiving disability compensation and other earned benefits, including old-age pensions and burial subsidies.

(I wrote about Eggemeyer for Inter Press News Service on Pacifica Radio and in my book "The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans.")

But instead of getting better, the delays that veterans face got worse on his watch. Much worse.

In March, CIR revealed that the Department of Veterans Affairs had

failed to provide key information to Congress and the public that indicated the agency's ability to quickly provide service-related benefits had virtually collapsed under Obama.

Internal VA documents obtained by CIR showed that the number of veterans waiting more than a year for their benefits grew from 11,000 in 2009 to 245,000 in December 2012 – an increase of more than 2,000 percent.

Wait times were especially long for veterans filing their first claim, including those returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan – 642 days in New York, 619 days in Los Angeles and 542 days in Chicago.

The documents also suggested why the problem was getting worse: the agency's boasts of hiring thousands of new claims processors did not account for employee turnover.

And despite four years and more than a half a billion dollars spent on a claims computer system, 97 percent of claims remained on paper, the documents showed.

Reaction to the story was immediate and widespread.

In April, the VA promised that by October no veteran would wait longer than a year. A series of top VA officials resigned. The long-delayed computer system was deployed and all VA employees were forced to work mandatory overtime.

As of mid-October, 145,000 fewer veterans were waiting for disability benefits than in March and the average wait time had dropped by three months to 188 days.

The bad news is that both the delays and the number of veterans waiting remained significantly worse than when the Obamas moved into the White House. Delays were more two months longer than they were in 2009, and the number of veterans waiting more than four months for disability benefits – the VA's own official mark of a "backlogged" claim – was 250,000 higher.

BACKLOG DATA IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Since August 2012, The Center for Investigative Reporting has maintained an online interactive map (bit.ly/P0No7m) designed to help journalists around the country report on the impact of the claims backlog in their communities.

The map includes data from the internal VA documents obtained by CIR as well as publicly available Department of Veterans Affairs performance data, published weekly as part of the agency's Monday Morning Workload Reports (vba.va.gov/reports/mmwr).

All that data has also been loaded into an API (application programming interface), published by CIR.

Data comes from each of the VA's 58 regional offices, which broadly follow state lines, except in populous states, which have more than one.

CIR also has partnered with the Public Insight Network to collect personal stories of veterans stuck in the backlog. We've gotten more than a hundred responses from across the country and are happy to share those contacts with other media interested in following the story. Cole Goins (cgoins@cironline.org) is the contact person.

Feel free to use any of this. All that we ask is that you credit The Center for Investigative Reporting for providing and analyzing the data.

HEALTH CARE

While James Eggemeyer waited for the VA to decide his disability claim, he also struggled to obtain quality health care from the agency. VA doctors prescribed the opiates Vicodin and Percocet to numb the physical pain from his back and shoulder injuries, but he found it difficult to get regular physical therapy appointments.

Post-traumatic stress disorder appointments were even harder to secure, he said, and he typically saw a mental health provider only when he showed up at the VA's psychiatric emergency room and said he was suicidal.

Meanwhile, the narcotic painkillers kept coming.

When he crashed his truck it into a pole near a Winn Dixie, the police report noted Eggemeyer wasn't drunk.

"I was on so many painkillers that I thought I was getting in the turning lane, but it was actually the curb," he said at the time. "I wrecked it and totaled it and then didn't have anywhere to live."

Journalists who cover veterans and the military have heard stories like Eggemeyer's countless times. Veterans, frustrated with the difficulty of getting timely health care appointments from the VA, say the agency's doctors are overmedicating them in order to get them out the door.

To see whether this is happening on a systematic basis, CIR filed a Freedom of Information Act request for 12 years of prescription data from the VA. We focused our inquiry on four common opiates – hydrocodone, oxycodone, methadone and morphine – because the narcotic painkillers are highly addictive and carry a substantial risk of overdose.

And VA researchers had published a paper in The Journal of the American Medical Association reporting that agency doctors were substantially more likely to prescribe opiates to veterans with PTSD or other mental health issues, even though those patients are most at risk of suicide and overdose.

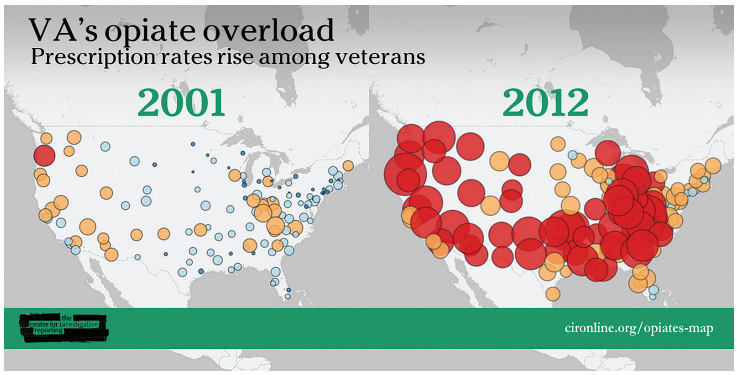
When the VA responded to our FOIA, we found that the number of opiate prescriptions had increased by 270 percent since the Sept. 11 attacks, far outstripping the increase in patients, contributing to a fatal overdose rate among VA patients that the agency's researchers said was nearly double the national average.

We also found that the narcotic prescription rate varied wildly across VA facilities, with doctors at the VA hospital in Roseburg, Ore., prescribing eight times as many opiates in 2012 as their counterparts in New York City. Since veterans in the two locations are likely in similar amounts of pain, that finding bolstered our conclusion that the spike in prescriptions was not closely linked to medical need.

Follow these stories at cironline.org/veterans.

Adithya Sambamurthy | The Center for Investigative Reporting

The Department of Veterans Affairs has supplied Tim Fazio with nearly 4,000 oxycodone pills since he returned home after tours in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2008. Fazio says he was never in acute physical pain but used the pills to blot out feelings of guilt for surviving when many of his friends did not.



Two weeks after the story ran, a subcommittee of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs grilled senior VA officials in Washington on the "dangers of VA's skyrocketing use of prescription painkillers."

As of press time, the VA had promised the House panel it would deliver a plan to combat the rise in opiate prescriptions within 30 days, but missed the deadline. At CIR, we'll be monitoring the situation.

PRESCRIPTION OPIATES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

As we did with our coverage of the claims backlog, CIR published localized data on prescription opiates in an online interactive map (va-opiates.apps.cironline.org). The map shows the number of prescriptions of each of the four opiates we tracked annually at every VA hospital and clinic nationwide since 2001.

It also contains the opiate prescription rate for each of the VA's 130 hospital systems (local networks of health facilities that broadly correspond to metro areas), and for its 23 geographic regions, called Veterans Integrated Service Networks.

With a few mouse clicks, you can see how much the opiate prescription rate has increased in your community and in your part of the country.

And, as with our backlog coverage, CIR has partnered with the Public Insight Network to collect personal stories of veterans interested in speaking with the media. Cole Goins (cgoins@cironline.org) is the contact person on that, too.

REPORTING TIPS

Interviewing veterans about their war-related pain can be psychologically difficult and emotionally draining – both for the reporter and for the veteran.

My general advice for conducting these interviews is to start with simple questions that establish facts and a timeline of events while giving the subject some control over what he or she wants to share. Short questions about deployment dates, the veteran's job in the military and the circumstances of the veteran's departure from the military often can reveal evocative details.

If you bone up on military terminology before conducting the interview, you can make the veteran more comfortable. Use of acronyms like MOS (military occupational specialty) and FOB (forward operating base) can help set him or her at ease.

Avoid asking the veteran's opinion about the political merits of the war unless the person brings up the topic, because this is likely to run up against a commitment to serve and feelings about the loss of friends.

Be sure to ask about photographs, which can spark memories and help the veteran feel comfortable talking about the past. It's a risk because it can be upsetting. So be sensitive. Let the veteran know that he or she can share photographs "off the record" and that you will not use any photograph for publication without permission.

Be sure to ask for proof of the veteran's claims, though. I never write about a veteran without obtaining a copy of his or her DD 214, a one-page form that shows the conditions of discharge from the military. This form includes rank, medals and history of deployments. It is necessary for obtaining any government benefits, so if a veteran shies away from sharing it or says it is lost, that is a red flag.

If you're reporting on health care, ask to see the veteran's medical records, which are now online and accessible through a password-protected website. If you are writing about disability benefits, ask to see the claim file

And be sure to have the veteran sign a privacy waiver (the VA has a standard form for this). With that information in hand, you will be far likelier to get a response from the VA about everything from a pending disability claim to a medical condition. At a minimum, they cannot cite privacy statutes in denying you a response.

But even after you've done all that, it can be hard to get VA officials in Washington to comment. For years, the agency has adopted a bunker mentality when dealing with media attention. But the agency has more than 300,000 employees. If you start writing about veterans, VA workers will read your articles and some will probably contact you. Be sure to respond to each email and phone call, because these will provide some of your best sources for future stories.

MEASURING IMPACT

Since I started covering veterans, nearly every veteran I've featured with a pending disability claim has been contacted by the VA and gotten a positive resolution, while those complaining about subpar medical care have begun to get more regular appointments.

The agency may face systematic problems, but it does not want to be embarrassed.

The results are heartwarming. A former U.S. Navy medic who had been living on the street with her toddler while she waited two years for compensation for PTSD saw her claim approved a day after I asked the agency for comment on her case. That same day, the VA transferred $39,075 in back pay to her bank account.

As for Eggemeyer, two years after I received that desperate phone call, I shared the stage with him at a book talk at The Carter Center in Atlanta.

After I wrote about his claim, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida called the local official who had been helping Eggemeyer, demanding the claim be settled. Shortly thereafter, Eggemeyer received a 100 percent disability rating and a retroactive benefit check.

James told me was living in a small home that he could afford with his monthly disability check. More importantly, his monthly disability check has eased his PTSD so that he can sleep at night. He has bought back the prized possessions he had pawned. He has reconnected with his son, and while he still is not fully healed, he is stable, on the road to both physical and mental recovery.

Aaron Glantz is a staff reporter at The Center for Investigative Reporting and author of three books on the Iraq war, most recently, "The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans."

TARGETING MILITARY CONTRACTS

Powerful accountability journalism can come from examining the billions the military spends on weapons programs

BY TONY CAPACCIO AND KATHLEEN MILLER // BLOOMBERG

The Cold War may be history and the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan a fading memory, but the weapons-buying machine fueled by the services, Congress and the defense companies – once dubbed the Iron Triangle – chugs along.

The how and the why of the Pentagon's decision to continue spending billions of dollars on jets, vehicles and vessels when it says cyber and terror attacks are the looming threats to the U.S. continue to confound. Let the policymakers, Capitol Hill and think tanks fight over those issues. It's the press's job at the national, regional and state level to cover not only why one system is selected over another, but also the execution – how well taxpayer dollars are spent acquiring, fielding and ultimately disposing of a system. It's also good to know what penalties a poorly performing contractor receives.

The Lockheed Martin Corp. F-35 provides what pilots refer to as a "target-rich environment" for aggressive accountability reporting. The reason is obvious – the F-35 is the Pentagon's costliest weapon system, with an estimated price tag of $391.2 billion for a fleet of 2,443 aircraft, up 68 percent from the projection in 2001 as measured in current dollars. The number of aircraft also is 409 fewer than called for in the original program.

Bloomberg D.C. editors this year decided to take a 30,000-foot look at the factors that have coalesced to keep the program funded in spite of continued cost, schedule and performance issues.

The resulting story, "Too Big To Kill," was the fourth installment in a multipart "Defense Spending" series (bit.ly/1iBYsp2). The series reported on the mismatch between anticipated wars and the hardware bought to fight them and how members of Congress, regardless of party, protect even unwanted programs to save hometown jobs.

MAKING THE CASE

Our F-35 story made the case the program is too hard to kill or significantly reduce in part because it's embedded not just in dozens of U.S. states, but also in at least nine countries in Europe and Asia, with more eying the jet's advertised capabilities.

The raw material to chart the program's scope was found on Lockheed Martin's F35.com website, under the "Economic Impact" link that has an interactive map site – click on a state and get the dollar impact. It also has a helpful section to assist a harried worker to "Write To Congress" and "Spread The Word."

Read the multipart investigation of defense spending at bit.ly/1iBYsp2.

The military program office website also includes a "Memorandum of Understanding" that lists the original aircraft quantities of the eight primary partners. You can find it at bit.ly/1gYXO6R.

Lockheed Martin Securities and Exchange Commission filings were useful, also. They indicated the program's overall importance to the No.1 defense contractor – 13 percent of current revenue.

We started reporting by trying to figure out the biggest F-35 critic in Congress – and all roads led to Sen. John McCain, who had described the program as "disgraceful" and a "tragedy." His most recent comments about the F-35s, made as he welcomed a squadron to his home state of Arizona, were very different.

The jet "may be the greatest combat aircraft in the history of the world," he said in a ceremony at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma. His kind words were the best example we found of how views of the program changed when it was close to home and the promise of jobs.

We also reached out to our colleagues in bureaus around the world (including Rome, Oslo, Ottawa and Tokyo) to hunt down whether the fighter jets were playing any role in local elections or political debates.

Norway, Canada, the U.K., Australia, Turkey, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark and the U.S. agreed in 2006 to cooperatively produce and sustain the F-35 jet. Israel and Japan later signed on to purchase jets and take part in their production.

Even so, the soaring price of the jets is painful for nations with budget woes. Our story noted the F-35 became a campaign issue in the race to replace Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti after a center-left candidate said the next administration should continue to cut planned F-35 orders.

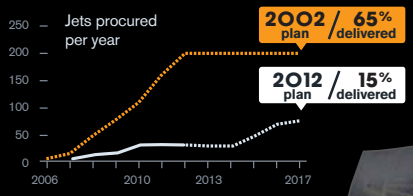
No Program Left Behind

The Joint Strike Fighter, or F-35 jet, is the most expensive weapons system in U.S. history. The program faces renewed scrutiny amid delays and concerns over rising life-cycle costs, which preliminary estimates suggest may top $1.5 trillion.

GRAPHIC: DAVE MERRILL / BLOOMBERG VISUAL DATA

Delayed Delivery

The U.S. military planned to have 1,591 F-35 jets delivered by 2017, according to a 2002 plan. Now, it's scheduled to have just 365 planes, or 15 percent of its planned 2,443 fighters, by 2017.



Soaring Costs

Procurement cost per jet

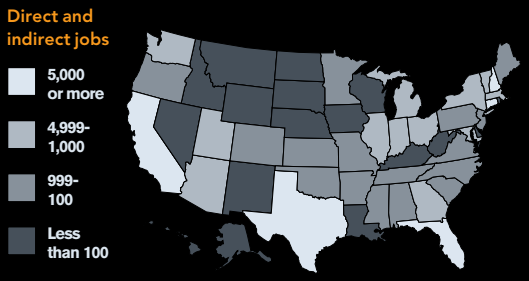
2001 $69 million

2012 $137 million

Note: Cost estimates based on current dollars from that year.

Congressional support

The program supports more than 130,000 supplier jobs, including about 35,000 direct jobs, in 45 states and Puerto Rico.



Lockheed's corporate PAC donated 38 percent more to candidates in federal races in the 2012 election cycle than in 2008.

Total congressional campaign contributions by Lockheed PAC

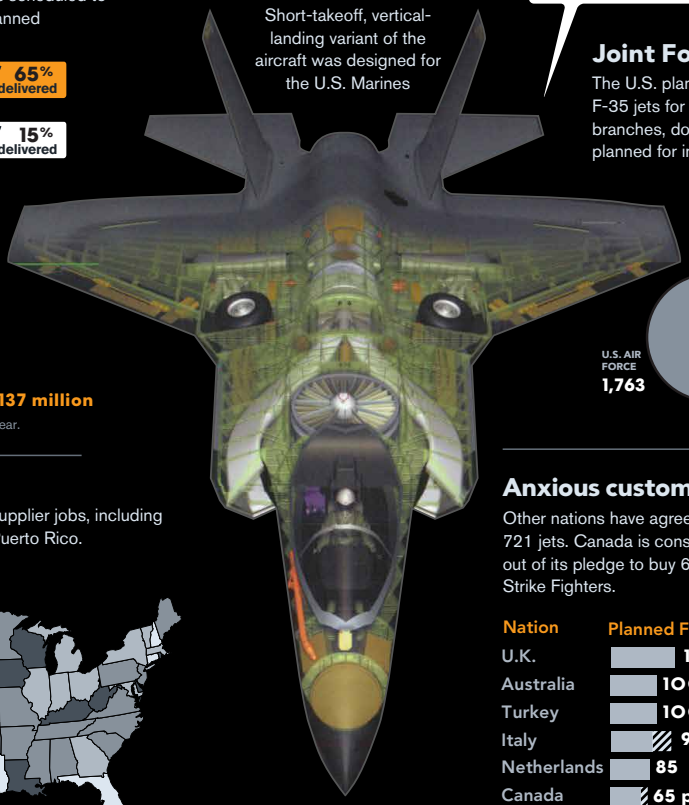
2008 $1.64 million

2012 $2.26 million

F-35B

(cutaway)

Short-takeoff, vertical-landing variant of the aircraft was designed for the U.S. Marines

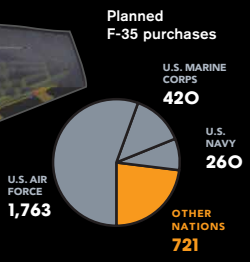


F-35B image by Lockheed Martin/JSF

The F-35 program is 70 percent over its original cost estimate and seven years behind schedule.

Joint Forces Fighter

The U.S. plans to order 2,443 F-35 jets for three military branches, down from 2,852 planned for in 2001.



Anxious customers

Other nations have agreed to purchase 721 jets. Canada is considering backing out of its pledge to buy 65 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters.

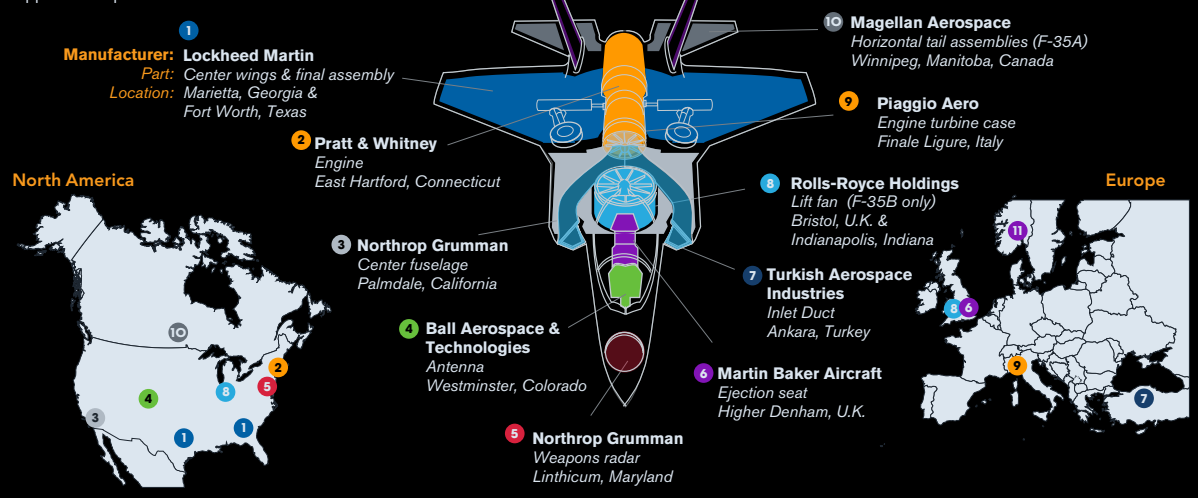
Nation	Planned F-35 purchase
U.K.	138
Australia	100
Turkey	100
Italy	90 (was 131)
Netherlands	85
Canada	65 planes (was 80)
Norway	52
Japan	42
Denmark	30 (was 48)
Israel	19

Note: Israel and Japan plan to buy F-35 jets but were not part of the original multi-nation partnership.

The F-35 funnels business to 45 states and nine other countries.

Supply Chain Obligations

Parts for variants of the F-35 are supplied by 1,300 domestic suppliers and partners in other countries.



Sources: U.S. Government Accountability Office, Lockheed Martin, data compiled by Bloomberg

The article also acknowledged that Canada was reconsidering its purchasing plans – and that a Lockheed spokesman floated the idea that if Canada backed out, it would also lose jobs tied to the jets.

LOCKHEED ASSISTANCE

We received a lot of help in our work tracking the F-35 supply chain from the Lockheed Martin media relations office. The Bethesda, Md.-based company, which is the top federal contractor, is eager to highlight just how many jobs (more than 130,000 at the time) are tied to the F-35 program, and how many states (45) and countries (nine) benefit from the work.

It's good for Lockheed if lawmakers remember just how many F-35 jobs are in their states, especially when everyone in Congress is hunting for cuts.

GOLDEN DOCUMENTS

A partial list of documents was gleaned from a web search, checking the Pentagon's defense.gov contracts-announcement site and searching for "F-35." We also mined public and semi-public documents that apply to any major weapons program.

The Pentagon's annual Selected Acquisition Report, or SAR, represents the military's most current official cost and schedule estimate on every major program. The document lists estimates for unit cost in the base-year dollars, reflecting when the program was started, and current dollars; procurement quantities; and basic information about any cost overruns.

The document, required by Congress, has been posted for the last couple of years on the website of the Pentagon's FOIA service center (1.usa.gov/xObkbj).

The F-35 SAR released in May was newsworthy because in contrast to past years, the document indicated that the overall cost to develop and procure the aircraft and engines has actually declined, albeit it by 1.1 percent, primarily because of reduced labor rates. Our February story pegged the overall cost at $395.7 billion. The new SAR noted a decrease to $391.2 billion

The Pentagon also has a website (1.usa.gov/IQ8mp6) that summarizes the basic cost data of all its major systems that's released about 60 days after the annual budget is made public. Among the most informative pages in each summary is a "Program Funding Status" chart that outlines how much the program is expected to cost, how much Congress has approved to date and the program balance. Through 2012, Congress had approved $66.2 billion for the F-35 program – so there's a lot of money left to spend.

We also buttressed the story with data gleaned from the Government Accountability Office's annual F-35 report that, unlike the SAR, gives more detail on current technical challenges in development and production.

Another public source we used is the annual report of the Pentagon's independent Director of Operational Test and Evaluation. The office monitors test performance. Weapons programs must be deemed "effective and suitable" in order to proceed into full-rate production, the most lucrative phase.

For several years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the annual report was available only in hard-copy form to limit its circulation, as it was deemed too sensitive for mass distribution. That's changed, as it's now posted at 1.usa.gov/1bd96je. The annual F-35 section is among the most sought after by program critics and supporters.

Yet another resource – the Pentagon's acquisition office this year published its first annual "Performance of the Defense Acquisition System." It's at www.acq.osd.mil. The document is a stellar history of cost growth over the last 20 years and the extent and causes, and it is useful to a reporter seeking to put problems with a local contract in context.

TRACKING ENFORCEMENT, DISCIPLINE

A word about penalties and disciplining contractors. Companies receive progress payments for product deliveries and depending on the contract type, share in the cost of overruns and under-runs.

There may also be provisions for the payment of award fees for quantifiable good performance. These fees often constitute the sole profit on a contract.

On the F-35, the Pentagon since 2010 has tightened the criteria used to assess award fee payments to Lockheed on its development contract. It's also tightened in the last four production contracts the amount of cost overruns Lockheed Martin must absorb.

Reporters covering any defense contract need to be familiar with contract type. Cost-plus type contracts put the government at most risk of using taxpayer dollars to cover overruns. Fixed-price incentive-type contracts set a target profit level that can go up or down if the contract exceeds or comes in below the target cost. Ask the company and service program office to explain the fee structure and if payment amounts can be released without an FOIA request.

The Pentagon's F-35 program office has been fairly transparent recently, disclosing Lockheed fees and how much they've been docked, such as that Lockheed Martin lost $31.5 million of a possible $52.5 million in U.S. payments last year because it failed to meet three milestones.

The Defense Contract Management Agency is the primary Pentagon organization responsible for in-plant oversight. Check its website (www.dcma.mil) to see if DCMA has a plant representative presence in your area and what monthly reports it generates on contractor performance. The press office number is 804-734-2596.

The agency's contract management office for Lockheed Martin's aeronautics unit has 127 civilians who monitor 1,300 aircraft contracts valued at $112 billion. The agency issues an internal F-35 "Monthly Assessment Report" that outlines quality and production trends. Some past reports released under FOIA are posted in the DCMA reading room (bit.ly/1k6XMGg). We have a current FOIA request for all those issued this year.

The agency also maintains 125 civilians at Boeing Co.'s Philadelphia facility where V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft and CH-47 Chinook helicopters are built.

Significantly, the DCMA has the authority to issue "Corrective Action Reports," or CARS, intended to flag progressively serious deficiencies. If you cover a contractor, check with DCMA whether it's been issued any CARs and their resolution status.

The agency also is responsible for enforcing a regulation in effect since August 2012 that allows for the withholding of up to 5 percent of a contractor's billings if one of several primary internal business systems is deemed out of compliance. The Pentagon depends on these to assess whether a company is performing on cost and schedule. The Pentagon as of December has withheld $222 million in payments from Lockheed Martin because of flaws in its system of tracking costs and schedules for F-35 and other aircraft contracts. The Pentagon this month certified Lockheed's system as compliant and concluded the withheld money could be released.

The agency in September also started to withhold 5 percent of billings on the next four F-35 jet engine contracts from United Technologies Corp.'s Pratt & Whitney unit over system flaws.

POSTSCRIPT

Not every story on defense contracting involves deep dives of multibillion dollar contracts.

In fact, the most common defense-contracting stories you'll encounter will be of the breaking kind. That lesson was reinforced in September.

After reports came out that Aaron Alexis, the shooter who killed 12 people at Washington's Navy Yard on Sept. 16, had been approved for a security clearance despite having a record of arrests and mental health problems, former Bloomberg reporter Danielle Ivory suspected that a contractor had probably performed his background check.

Using the federal procurement database system, Ivory found only a handful of companies that specialized in doing the work. One in particular, USIS – a unit of Altegrity Inc. – appeared to perform the majority of background investigations for the government. Knowing there was a good chance that one of the companies in the database had vetted Alexis, Ivory focused on them. Bloomberg eventually broke the news that USIS, which performed Edward Snowden's background check, had cleared Alexis, as well.

Tony Capaccio has covered military issues since 1986, with Bloomberg News since 1997. He's been an IRE member since the early 1980s.

Kathleen Miller, a Bloomberg News reporter since January 2011, covers federal contracting and the Department of Veterans Affairs from Washington, D.C. She has also reported for The Associated Press in Mexico City; Cheyenne, Wyo.; Annapolis, Md.; and Washington, D.C.; as well as for the Washington Examiner.

IRE RESOURCES

The IRE Resource Center is a major research library containing more than 25,500 investigative stories – both print and broadcast – and about 4,000 tipsheets available at ire.org/resource-center or by contacting the Resource Center directly, 573-882-3364 or rescntr@ire.org.

TIPSHEETS

No. 3729: "Covering Veteran's Issues." Greg Campbell and Michael de Yoanna, independent journalists, and Henry Schuster of "60 Minutes," give tips on dealing with families of veterans and selecting documents to request when filing a FOIA. (2012)

No. 3522: "Covering Defense Department Weapons Programs." Tony Capaccio of Bloomberg News offers detailed tips on how to cover the Defense Department weapons programs, including what you'll run into and the kind of sources you'll need to get the inside scoop. (2011)

No. 3428: "Homecoming: Covering returning." Kelly Kennedy of Army Times outlines story ideas for covering returning veterans. Kennedy describes issues that veterans in your community might be facing, how to approach these stories and how to interview veterans. (2010)

No. 3262: "Investigating the casualties of war." Deborah Nelson of the University of Maryland discusses how to cultivate and handle sources when covering war. She also lists sources for gathering information on military personnel, deceased veterans, military unit associations, U.S. casualties, civilian deaths, military justice, military legal systems and much more. (2009)

IRE JOURNAL

"Favors in Fine Print: Defense spending bill packed with $11.8 billion in earmarks," The Seattle Times. David Heath of explains how he reported on unnecessary purchases that Congress forced the military to make. The micromanagement of military spending is done through earmarks buried in appropriation bills, a legislative trick invented by lobbyists, usually to funnel tax dollars directly to one of their clients. Heath discusses how he tracked down concrete examples of useless and expensive military purchases. (January/February 2008)

"Military maneuvers: Private housing contract rife with cost overruns and delays," Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Eric Nalder discusses his investigation into housing fraud involving military housing and a private development company. The company hired to maintain existing military housing and build new homes was cheating taxpayers out of hundreds of millions of dollars. The investigation found 178,000 military homes that had been given to private companies to manage with little military oversight. (November/December 2008)

"'Shh!'... Suicide, secrets and veterans: CBS uncovers suicide rates that the government tried to hide," CBS. Correspondent Armen Keteyian and producer Pia Malbran describe uncovering sensitive information about veteran suicides that the government was trying to keep under wraps. A complicated data trail led them to information on an epidemic of suicide among those who had served in the military. For those between 20-24, the rate was estimated at 2-4 times greater than that of civilians of the same age. (November/December 2008)

"Collateral Damage: Military prescribes drugs at record rate to combat mentla and physical injuries," The Denver Post. David Olinger the story that revealed how drugs were being relied upon by military to patch up their troops – and in some cases redeploy them. "The numbers underlined what soldiers already were telling us... the Defense Department was relying on drugs to deploy some mentally and physically maimed soldiers and to patch up those returning home with concussive brain injuries, depression and combat stress." (November/December 2008)

STORIES

No. 25744: ProPublica. "Lost to History: When War Records Go Missing" revealed the widespread failure by the military to keep and preserve field records from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving injured or disabled veterans unable to prove they had seen action. "Lost to History" showed that dozens of Army units and the U.S. Central Command lacked adequate war records, that Pentagon leaders had years of warnings but never sufficiently addressed the problem, and that commanders failed to take record keeping orders seriously. The stories also vividly narrate the personal costs of this failure. (2012)

No. 25735: The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism. "Adding insult to injury: Wisconsin veterans face job challenges, stigma" examines the stigma of disability and even of military service that Wisconsin veterans confront while looking for jobs. (2012)

EXTRA! EXTRA!

"How the Pentagon' s payroll quagmire traps soldiers," Reuters. Scot J. Paltrow and Kelly Carr discover that "pay errors in the military are widespread," and as many have found, "once mistakes are detected, getting them corrected – or just explained – can test even the most persistent soldiers." (Tagged: Government (federal/state/local), Military, Veterans affairs; July 2, 2013)

Data Breach

Journalists accused of hacking

By Isaac Wolf
Scripps Howard News Service

They called us hackers, alerted the FBI and threatened a civil suit. But we were only doing our jobs.

The conflict arose as my colleagues at Scripps News and I reported on a trove of 170,000 highly sensitive documents that we'd found publicly posted online via a Google search. As we pursued the story (bit.ly/1cxqufp), the company that had failed to secure its records forced us to address allegations that we'd broken the law.

Our experience provides several lessons for other newsrooms collecting and using sensitive records, including:

- Record your process. A Scripps broadcast journalist shot footage of me locating the applications via Google search results. When the company challenged us, this footage served as an immensely helpful layer of support to corroborate our version of events.
- Publish early when necessary. In response to attacks ahead of our original publication schedule, we uploaded video showing how we found and accessed the applications. That video disarmed allegations that we had "hacked."
- Overcommunicate. I spent far more time on this project than any other I'd worked on discussing the data. Editors, lawyers and information technology staff needed to fully understand the records we held, what we wanted to do with them and how we should safeguard them.

The story began this spring when I started researching Lifeline, a federal program to subsidize phone service for low income households. My plan was to focus on companies that had grown the most quickly. Once I had identified those, I would answer a simple question: "How'd they get so big?"

I chipped away by compiling and analyzing company-specific Lifeline disbursement data from the administrative arm of the Federal Communications Commission, which oversees the program. One such company that had grown quickly was Oklahoma City-based TerraCom Inc.

While I was backgrounding TerraCom, a Google search revealed a link to a completed PDF application. I'd seen blank Lifeline applications from other companies – often posted in regulatory submissions or on their websites – and I wondered what this one looked like. I clicked on the link from Google, assuming this PDF would be of a blank application.

The application was filled out and included name, date of birth, full Social Security number and information about participation in other government benefit programs. It didn't cross my mind that the application's completed fields corresponded to a real person's information. I assumed this was a dummy record populated with fake information – meant to illustrate how an application would be completed.

It struck me as odd that the application was posted not on TerraCom's public-facing website, but rather on a totally random domain. I wanted to see what else was on this website. So I conducted a domain-specific Google query, asking the search engine to return every PDF file that it could find from this website. The search returned thousands of results. As I began to click through PDFs linked from the Google results page, all were completed applications. It seemed less and less likely that this was a one-off test application.

To see if these records corresponded to real people, I compared them against other public records, including LexisNexis and public listing directories. The information matched. The Lifeline applications belonged to real people.

To see if these records corresponded to real people, I compared them against other public records, including LexisNexis and public listing directories. The information matched. The Lifeline applications belonged to real people.

I immediately shared this find with editors and other reporters working on the project. IT and legal were immediately notified, and we began planning to securely collect and store the sensitive records.

Another crucial find: The website hosting these applications publicly displayed the directory file – essentially the master page listing every unique URL containing a Lifeline application. The website also held tens of thousands of other sensitive records from Lifeline applicants, such as images of driver's licenses, bank account statements and Social Security cards.

With a list of the unique URLs, web experts in the D.C. bureau and Scripps headquarters in Cincinnati scraped the website with Python code. In total, Scripps found more than 170,000 such sensitive files. Scripps built intensive firewalls to ensure we were securely storing and accessing the records we'd collected. We were forbidden from emailing sensitive files, or sharing the information with anyone other than the people whose names were in the files.

Many questioned our decision to download these records. TerraCom dubbed us the "Scripps Hackers," threatened to sue and said they'd referred the matter to the FBI. A lively debate ensued on the NICAR-L listserv about the ethics of scraping under such conditions. Tech and journalism blogs speculated about the legal consequences we'd face. Some, including the British website for Wired magazine, reported that Scripps already had been sued. (Nearly seven months after that item was published, I've yet to see any evidence of this.)

The decision to collect these records wasn't one Scripps took lightly. Editors, lawyers and IT staffers spent long hours working with me and other reporters to think through our decision. Under what circumstances could we show an application? What should we tell law enforcement when they asked for information?

As a news organization we firmly believed then, as we do now, that collecting these files would serve the public interest. These records, in combination with dogged reporting, would provide a glimpse of the program's inner workings.

These records were already publicly released, and as TerraCom would later admit, others besides Scripps had accessed the files. These records would also help us answer a question that authorities have been trying – and struggling – to answer: How has TerraCom grown so fast?

After Scripps notified TerraCom of the publicly accessible records, they were immediately placed behind a firewall. (We later learned that the files were being stored by Call Centers India, a data management company TerraCom had hired.)

Instead of thanking Scripps for spotting the gaping vulnerability, TerraCom went on the offensive. In a letter, a lawyer for the company claimed that Scripps had "engaged in numerous violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act," and demanded that Scripps identify which news organization employee was to blame. The phone company lawyer wrote that "civil litigation is highly likely." (Scripps denies all allegations that it broke any law, says it used the records only for journalistic purposes and has stored them under multiple safeguards.)

We faced another challenge when several Oklahoma news outlets reported on the data breach before we'd published our reporting. TerraCom alleged that we'd gone "beyond a simple Internet search" to find and access the sensitive files. To neutralize this untrue statement, Scripps uploaded video showing me accessing the sensitive files via Google and explaining how I'd found them.

When we were able to make contact with Lifeline applicants, my colleagues and I heard startling responses: Fifty "applicants" disputed that they'd signed the applications. Some pointed out that their names had been misspelled.

Amid this, my colleagues and I continued to work the records. We tried to contact more than 600 people included in the files, mostly unsuccessfully: No one answered our calls, the phone number was bad, or we couldn't find a person in public databases whose information matched what was in the Lifeline application.

When we were able to make contact with Lifeline applicants, my colleagues and I heard startling responses: Fifty "applicants" disputed that they'd signed the applications. Some pointed out that their names had been misspelled. Many said they'd never heard of TerraCom. Additionally, former sales agents said that they – not applicants – fabricated and signed the forms on instruction from superiors.

Responding to Scripps' reporting, U.S. House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., called for a congressional hearing. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., asked the U.S. Department of Justice to open a criminal probe and called on the FCC to remove TerraCom from Lifeline. Also, three state attorney generals have announced investigations into the data breach identified by Scripps.

We also later learned that a broad group of technology and privacy experts from the Mozilla Foundation, Princeton and Stanford universities and the University of Pennsylvania had come to support our work. In a July Amici Curiae brief to the Third Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, the experts described our investigation as "important" and said we'd reported "bravely."

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Shields Up: It's a war over information

BY DAVID CUILLIER
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Now is the winter of our discontent, and yes, are we riled.

Journalists are outraged at the government spying and secret tapping of Associated Press phone records. Journalists are angered by the government threatening New York Times reporter James Risen with prison for doing his job well. Journalists are fed up with federal bullying of the Fourth Estate.

It's time to grab pen and pitchfork, and push back. Hard.

For the first time in years we have a shot at getting a federal shield law passed. The planets have aligned, but it will take a united front. All of us. Your help is needed – and warranted.

The Free Flow of Information Act of 2013 is moving ahead. The Senate Judiciary Committee, which has been a key gatekeeping point, approved the draft legislation on Sept. 12 and Congress could vote on the law in the coming months. The shield law would provide some protections for journalists against willy-nilly subpoenas for notes and confidential sources.

The law isn't perfect, we know. And there has been a healthy discussion within the journalism community about its merits. That's great – we tend to do that as a people, question everything. Here are some of the concerns raised, and the responses:

- **There's no need for it. Few journalists are subpoenaed by the federal government.**

Bullpucky. A Sept. 24 Columbia Journalism Review article cites a Department of Justice report that only 89 media subpoenas were issued from 2001 through 2010. That is ludicrous. A 2007 study by Brigham Young University law professor RonNell Andersen Jones found that journalists face about 800 subpoenas a year by federal agencies, mostly regarding criminal and civil matters involving people who get in trouble – the bread and butter of investigative reporting. The same study found about 7,000 subpoenas are issued every year at the state and local levels. Journalists know the value of state shield protections, afforded in all states but Wyoming. We need that protection from federal agencies, as well.

- **It won't protect Risen or other cases pertaining to national security.**

Certainly, there is no guarantee a shield law will protect anyone, and there are allowances for information pertaining to national security, but the reality is a federal shield law would improve the odds a judge will protect a journalist, even in cases of national security. The judges in Risen's case noted that a shield law would have given them more reason to rule in his favor. Courts tend to defer to legislative and executive guidance on these matters. That's why a statute is so valuable.

- **The legislation inadequately defines "journalist."**

True, but so does everyone else. Two legal scholars published in October in the New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy an excellent look at how professional organizations, the courts and statutes have attempted to define "journalist." It's all over the map, but the reality is when government insiders want to get crucial information to the public about corruption, they seek out professional journalists, not professional baristas or building contractors. Journalists receive fee waivers and expedited review in FOIA. They get credentialed access to the White House, Congress, crime scenes and sporting event press boxes. It isn't elitism – it's the most practical way for citizens to get the information they need.

- **The bill is inadequate. Better to have no law than bad law.**

True, the law as written has its flaws. But legislation is about compromise, and it's silly to say this law would do nothing or make it worse for journalists. I asked five shield law legal scholars what they thought, and four of them said journalists are better off with the law than without. The lone dissenter had good reasons for not liking the law, but we know that state shield laws – even the weak ones – work to some extent. I was kept out of jail twice by state shield protections, and I'm sure most IRE members can say the same. Why in the world – for the good of us, our sources and the public – would we turn that protection down?

So, news Spartans, it's time to get in formation and raise the shield. When the Free Flow of Information Act comes to a vote, particularly in the Senate, make sure to raise your voice. Write about it. Editorialize. Call and write your members of Congress. Actually do it.

This might be the best chance we have, so let's not blow it. It's time to push back against government intrusion on press freedom. To quote from the movie "300": "No retreat. No surrender. … This day we rescue a world from mysticism and tyranny, and usher in a future brighter than anything we could imagine. … To victory!"

David Cuillier, Ph.D., is director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Ariz., and president of the Society of Professional Journalists. He is co-author, with Charles Davis, of "The Art of Access."

More information

Senate Bill 987: Free Flow of Information Act of 2013 text
1.usa.gov/1d34RGs

Society of Professional Journalists shield law page
spj.org/shieldlaw.asp

"'People who aren't really reporters at all, who have no professional qualifications': Defining a Journalist and Deciding Who May Claim the Privileges," New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy, Oct. 8, 2013
bit.ly/16w711Z

More commentary by David Cuillier about the shield law
spjnetwork.org/president/

Flaws in hazardous chemical data

BY MICHAEL B. PELL AND RYAN MCNEILL
REUTERS

An explosion at a fertilizer facility in West, Texas, killed 14 people in April and destroyed about a third of the town. The town middle school was ruined, and the high school was condemned. A nearby apartment building and a senior living center were blown to shreds.

In pursuing this story, Reuters' data team obtained the TIER II hazardous chemical storage data from 30 states. The data includes a variety of information about hazardous chemicals stored at sites around the country including the chemical name, a description of the chemical, the physical state of the chemical and the location of the site. Each state is required to maintain these data under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act. Twenty refused to make the data public.

Using the data, Reuters found schools, hospitals, churches and hundreds of thousands of homes within a mile of facilities that store the same chemical that exploded in West. Just as troubling, Reuters found serious inaccuracies in the data.

Using the data, Reuters found schools, hospitals, churches and hundreds of thousands of homes within a mile of facilities that store the same chemical that exploded in West.

Organizations operating the sites reported the wrong chemicals, failed to report hazardous chemicals and reported wrong storage locations. Even when sites reported correctly, two states – Illinois and Wisconsin – introduced errors into the public databases through which they disclose information from TIER II reports.

These inaccuracies pose a danger because communities and emergency responders are supposed to use this data to prepare, prevent and respond to fires and explosions at hazardous chemical storage sites.

In 2006, clothing company Carhartt Inc. failed to report that its plant in Morehead, Ky., was storing chlorine on the premises. Two firefighters were exposed and one suffered chemical burns when they shut a leaking valve at the plant without proper safety gear. Carhartt said the plant was shuttered at the time of the leak, but didn't say why reports weren't filed.

EPCRA was passed by Congress in 1986 after a chemical leak in Bhopal, India, which killed thousands of people, and another in West Virginia. The law requires states to make information about chemical storage facilities available to the public.

There are hundreds of thousands of sites nationwide required to report hazardous chemical inventories under the TIER II system. Some 500,000 chemicals are subject to the requirement.

Many states refuse to make the entire TIER II database available. At first, Idaho agreed to release the data. Then, it reversed itself and cited Homeland Security concerns. Oklahoma first refused, citing a nonexistent exemption in the state's public records law, and then reversed course after a call from a Reuters attorney.

States such as Colorado and Missouri will provide data only for specific facilities.

The EPA never provided a straight answer as to whether agency officials think the states are required to release the entire database under the law.

West Virginia refused to provide even facility-specific information, citing terrorism concerns. Pennsylvania evaluates TIER II requests on a case by case basis, providing site-specific information to requesters it officials deem appropriate. South Carolina only provides site specific information to people who can prove they live near the facility.

The Illinois Emergency Management Agency, on the other hand, provides the data as a downloadable file on its website. Unfortunately, when a Reuters' reporter called one of the companies, we discovered the company had not stored one of the chemicals listed in the data for years.

The Illinois Emergency Management Agency determined that the data it had posted on its website included every chemical a site had ever stored and not just the chemicals in its most current TIER II report. This was probably caused by a bad JOIN by the agency. The agency fixed the problem after Reuters brought it to their attention.

Wisconsin data provided to Reuters included storage sites that had not existed in years. There were hundreds of similar errors in the data.

Reuters discovered this after publishing a national map of sites in neighborhoods and near schools and hospitals that

store ammonium nitrate, the same chemical that exploded in West, Texas. The map included several facilities in Wisconsin.

In response to the map, one company called and told us it had left the state years earlier.

Further review of the Wisconsin data by Reuters showed Amron LLC, an ammunition manufacturer, stored hydrogen chloride, sulfuric acid, nitric acid, propane and anhydrous ammonia at a plant in Waukesha, Wis., in 2012. But the company said it had shuttered the facility in 1998.

Wisconsin officials could not explain the errors and said they didn't know how to fix them. They said the inaccurate information wasn't shared with first responders. Reuters was not able to independently confirm this.

The online map encouraged dozens of other companies from other states to call Reuters as well.

Many said they did not store ammonium nitrate at the facility indicated on the map. But after investigating, these companies often learned employees had mistakenly reported storing ammonium nitrate.

Failing to report the existence of a hazardous material may be more dangerous. But reports that falsely flag the presence of a dangerous substance can also create safety risks, according to chemical safety experts.

False-positive reports can drastically change how responders might react to an emergency. If a factory incorrectly reports storing an explosive such as ammonium nitrate, for instance, the fire department may decide to let a fire burn that might otherwise have been extinguished. This could cause injuries to employees, property damage or even a chemical release that threatens the surrounding community.

Reuters found some sites had failed to report storing hazardous chemicals by comparing the TIER II data with other chemical reports that sites are required to submit to local, state and federal agencies.

Reuters also found errors in the TIER II data by comparing TIER II reports with community response plans from a different EPA program under the Clean Air Act that include chemical inventories. We found that a water-treatment facility in Valley City, N.D., failed to submit a Tier II report altogether earlier this year. After Reuters notified state officials, the plant filed a Tier II showing the presence of a host of toxic or explosive materials, including ammonium hydroxide, chlorine, sulfuric acid, sodium hydroxide, sodium permanganate, hydrochloric acid and phosphoric acid. City officials said they aren't sure why no reports were filed and are looking into the issue.

Such errors and omissions can go unnoticed for years because the federal regulator that oversees the TIER II system—the EPA—and most state agencies make no effort to verify the data.

Michael B. Pell and Ryan McNeill are data journalists for Reuters. They can be reached at michael.pell@thomsonreuters.com and ryan.mcneill@thomsonreuters.com.

Snapshots from our blogs

Investigating nonprofits during charitable-giving season

BY MARK HORVIT

This holiday season you can help your audience make sure the charities they support are spending donated money wisely. The Center for Investigative Reporting has posted a guide (bit.ly/1hD6fUG), and CIR reporter Kendall Taggart, along with Tampa Bay Times reporter Kris Hundley, put together a great tip sheet for IRE's 2013 conference available to IRE members (bit.ly/IPWZxJ). For even more resources on investigating nonprofits, including tip sheets and examples of stories others have done, check out our Story Pack (bit.ly/1969f7v) on the topic.

10 irrefutable and nonnegotiable rules of responsible data journalism

BY LIZ LUCAS

Few things in life (and journalism) are literally irrefutable and nonnegotiable. But we think this list comes pretty close. Journalists who use data come from a variety of backgrounds and have a wide spectrum of resources, skills and time to do the work. Regardless of these differences, we've put together some simple rules that apply to a yearlong project or a two-day turnaround, for a recent boot camp graduate or a veteran SQL hound, to a spreadsheet or a relational database.

1. Remember to refer to data as plural, unless you find it annoying (and I do).

2. Always save a copy of the original data. Keep it somewhere safe. Never mess with it.

3. Understand the data before you touch it. Read any available documentation, go through the record layout, talk to the agency that keeps and/or created the data.

4. Assume nothing about your data: what's in it, what's not in it, what that ambiguous "date" field refers to; nothing.

5. Know your data. Run integrity checks on all of your columns, know the range of your date fields, the cleanliness of your geography fields; know it inside and out.

6. Check record counts. When you import data, check the number of records imported against the documentation, or ask the agency for a record count. When you slice a table or join two tables, make sure the count of the results makes sense.

7. Never make changes to any of your data columns. Create new columns for those changes.

8. Be suspicious. If your results don't look right, or aren't what you expected, investigate. Find out why.

9. Have someone else check your work, ideally someone who understands data but is not involved in the project.

10. Be confident. Don't let fear make you second-guess your every move. If you're careful and diligent, data can improve your story.

If you have rules that you feel should be added to this list, or if you'd like to campaign for the removal of one of these items, please email liz@ire.org with your arguments.

Transparency Watch: EPA lacks transparency, US Senate report says

BY SARAH HARKINS

Minority members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works released a report on Sept. 9 claiming that the Environmental Protection Agency has "a dismal history of competently and timely responding to FOIA requests," has failed to adequately train staff members on FOIA policies, has shown bias in deciding to honor fee waiver requests and has misused email accounts.

Central to the committee's complaints is former EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson's use of a secondary email account and occasional use of a fake alias to respond to emails. Jackson also used a personal account to correspond with a lobbyist from Siemens AG. Jackson has said the secondary email account was common practice for managing large amounts of email.

The EPA inspector general is currently reviewing the agency's FOIA policies, and responses and employees are being retrained in FOIA policies under current EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy.

Some of the committee members filing the report receive their largest campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry and from agribusiness. Environmental groups have also filed complaints during this time, but some states claim these legal actions were coordinated by the EPA to change regulations.

Read the report on Document Cloud at bit.ly/1dH40vc.

Where to begin if you're learning to code

BY SARAH HARKINS

In October, IRE hosted a new bootcamp for journalists to learn web scraping and programming in Python. IRE offers workshops like this often – check our events and training page for opportunities to learn new data skills. But if you were unable to make a bootcamp or just can't wait until NICAR14 to start learning, here are some resources to help you begin.

Where to start

Bento: bentobox.io

Bento is a diagram to walk you through where to begin when you want to learn coding. You can begin with HTML and watch as your next-step languages are highlighted, or if you already have some experience, you can click any language you're familiar with and other related languages will be sorted for you.

"Learning to make the internets – a journalist's guide" by Andy Boyle: bit.ly/1hIV3G8

Boyle's guide is funny and insightful, explaining why you should begin with learning HTML and how can you progress from there. Once you get down the basics, Boyle's site also

includes an entire section devoted to "journo web dev" as well as links to other great resources.

Blockly: code.google.com/p/blockly

If you want to get into the mindset of a programmer, you'll find Blockly gives you an interactive visual introduction to programming logic. Users have a set of blocks which resemble puzzle pieces. Build from the blocks provided and run your program to see how it works. You can then export the program you've created to view the code in JavaScript, Python and XML.

Online tutorials (free)

Codecademy: codecademy.com

- Pros: Lessons are broken into small pieces, so they're easy to complete if you only have a few minutes.
- Cons: Many lessons build off of each other. If you want to go back and review a section, you may need to read more than one lesson for context.

Codecademy is a free website with step-by-step tutorials to walk you through learning HTML, CSS, jQuery, JavaScript, PHP, Python and Ruby. You work with their built-in text editor, running your code on the site to confirm it's working. You can learn through individual lessons or complete small projects. If you get stuck, there are hints on each page and a message board where you can ask for help. You can track your progress with badges, infographics and rankings. You can also sign up for alerts to know when new lessons and languages are added.

Coursera: coursera.org

- Pros: Coursework is taught by professionals and is more structured and class-like.
- Cons. Course offerings change frequently.

Coursera courses are created by universities and function more like online classrooms. Students watch or listen to lectures and participate in online quizzes and class interactions. Classes are free, but some courses also offer a paid version. Students must enroll but are not required to complete all assignments. Also, you can receive assistance from other students. At the end, you receive a grade or statement of progress from the professor.

Programs created for journalists

Code with me: codewithme.us

Code with me is a two-day coding workshop designed specifically for journalists. There is an application process and an $85 registration fee. In sessions, there is one mentor for every two students. The teaching materials are also available online under a Creative Commons license if you want to arrange your own workshop.

For Journalism: forjournalism.com

For Journalism began as a Kickstarter for data journalism education. There are sessions and materials on Django, Ruby on Rails and JavaScript. Follow their Twitter account (@forjournalism) for more information.

Hacks/Hackers: hackshackers.com

Many cities host Hacks/Hackers meetups for journalists to learn and develop code alongside more experienced journalists and programmers.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS & EDITORS, INC.

is a 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 25,500 investigative-reporting stories through our website.

Contact: Lauren Grandestaff, lauren@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: Elizabeth Lucas, liz@ire.org. To order data, call 573-884-7711.

ON-THE-ROAD TRAINING – As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conference 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: Jaimi Dowdell, jaimi@ire.org, 314-402-3281 or Megan Luther, megan@ire.org, 605-996-3967

PUBLICATIONS:

THE IRE JOURNAL – Published four 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 Luther, megan@ire.org, 605-996-3967

UPLINK – An online publication 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

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