

Delaware Online/The News Journal documented Diane Kraus' final months as she advocated for terminally ill patients' rights to end their lives with medication. ISABEL HUGHES/USA TODAY NETWORK



The Citizen Times of Asheville, North Carolina, investigated Haven on the Hill, a temporary Helene disaster relief site, and its site operator, James Lunsford. JOSH BELL/USA TODAY NETWORK

IMPACT REPORT

STORIES THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

In 2025, the USA TODAY Network published articles, videos and podcasts that made a real impact and changed lives across America



Bilingual reporting by the Detroit Free Press held city officials accountable after flooding from a water main break in southwest Detroit in February displaced residents who are primarily Spanish-speaking. The reporting prompted the city to make changes to a hotline and a liability waiver. MANDI WRIGHT/USA TODAY NETWORK

Policies and lives changed

Reporting across the USA TODAY Network led to resignations, new laws, policy reforms and public safety fixes.

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Podcasts drive reform, justice

A Florida Today show helped free an inmate who served 23 years for a murder he didn't commit.

Page 3D

Protecting freedoms

A USA TODAY Network cohort of First Amendment reporters revealed abuses and exposed censorship.

Page 4D

Putting focus on immigration

USA TODAY's coverage on immigration provided readers a fuller picture of President Trump's increased enforcement.

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REAL-WORLD JOURNALISM

STORIES
CHANGE
LAWS,
LIVESNetwork reporting impacts
communities big and smallPaige O. Windsor
USA TODAY NETWORK

NORTHEAST

Terminally ill woman's story
shapes landmark legislation

Delaware Online/The News Journal chronicled Diane Kraus' final months as she advocated for terminally ill patients' right to end their lives with prescription medication. The Delaware Online/News Journal story documented the personal stakes of the debate, including the practical and emotional realities facing patients nearing the end of their lives. Kraus died before the Legislature passed a bill establishing strict criteria for medical aid in dying and before the new governor signed it into law. The reporting, grounded in her openness and willingness to be documented through her final days, helped shift public understanding and reframe a contentious debate for readers and lawmakers.

Investigation prompts
statewide policy change

The Journal News/lohud in New York exposed how a Westchester County teacher accused of sexual abuse obtained a job at a nearby district while allegations about the teacher were being investigated. After the reporter contacted officials, the hiring district fired the teacher. The New York Regents Board then created an emergency hearing process allowing the state to temporarily remove a teacher's license when credible allegations indicate a threat to public safety, pending resolution.

Reporting exposes failures,
spurs fire safety reforms

A fire that killed nine people at a Fall River, Massachusetts, assisted living facility in July 2025 was the state's deadliest blaze in 40 years. The Herald News examined failures in mutual aid, staffing and budget constraints, and community response, as well as reporting on lawsuits and accountability questions. The reporting prompted Fall River to change how it handles mutual aid and the deployment of off-duty firefighters. The city and the state also moved quickly to fund additional resources for the department.

Lawsuit forces release
of 911 records after shooting

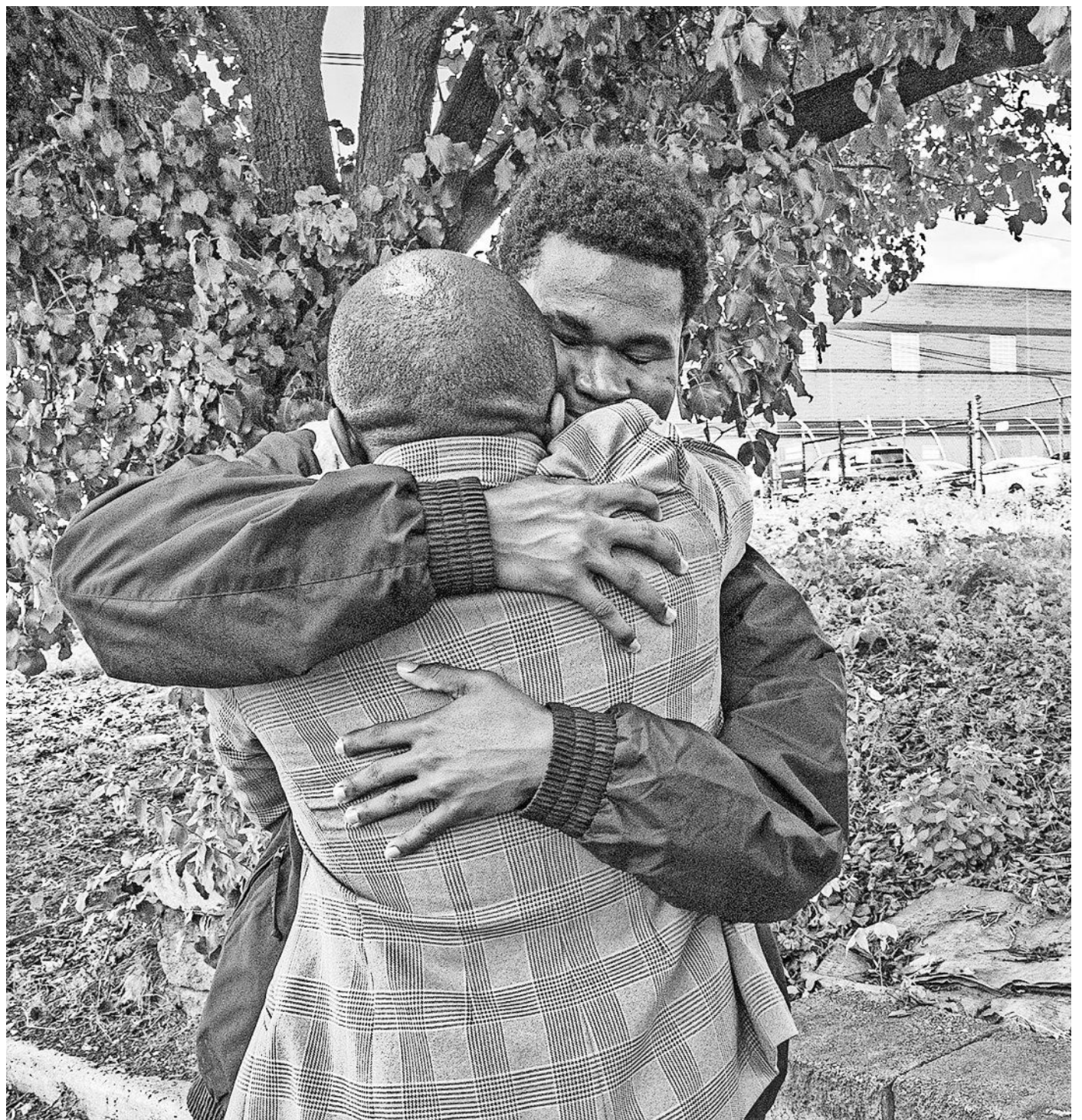
The York Daily Record sought 911 response logs and call recordings after a shooting at UPMC Memorial Hospital on Feb. 22, 2025, that killed West York police officer Andrew Duarte and wounded others. When York County denied access to the 911 call data, the Daily Record filed a lawsuit. A settlement led to the release of a partially redacted transcript that helped establish a public record of emergency response details. The outcome provided the community with clearer accountability around response timelines and decision-making after the shooting.

Investigation forces resignation
of state watchdog leader

The New Jersey State Commission of Investigation executive director resigned days after The Asbury Park Press revealed she had a second full-time job and lived out of state. The story came after the agency refused to explain who was leading it after its former executive director died in a car crash. The future of the agency was in doubt through most of 2025. In December, a bill was heard in the state Senate that would have given the agency more power by folding the comptroller's office under it. The measure was tabled after more Asbury Park Press stories showed how the Legislature was using the scandal to eliminate other watchdog agencies.

ICE releases high school student
after Journal News reporting

High school student Alan Pierre, who had been given permission to enter the United States with parole status, was detained by ICE last summer as part of the Trump administration's push to apprehend undocumented immigrants. The Journal News/



Bonnie Brien's daughter Rachel Pisacreta died after her health deteriorated while she was living in New Jersey's group home system for adults with developmental disabilities. She was 34 years old.

MICHAEL KARAS/USA TODAY NETWORK

lohud wrote multiple times about Pierre, whose father and his lawyer said was in the country legally and had no criminal history. Community momentum for Pierre's release grew, and within days of The Journal News/lohud's initial story, Pierre was freed from federal detention.

MIDDLE AMERICA /
MIDWESTProfile connects struggling
bakery in Milwaukee with lifeline

When the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel told the story of a local baker fighting to open her second location, the community took notice. The bakery's grand opening was delayed for weeks because of unlicensed contractor work that left the owner thousands of dollars in debt and scrambling to stay afloat. She worked long hours to pay her team and keep the lights on. After the profile was published, a local investor who was moved by the story reached out to the bakery owner. The investor offered to help cover the bakery's debt so the business could continue operating.

Wisconsin hunger campaign
surpasses goal with
592,000 meals donated

USA TODAY Network-Wisconsin's annual Stock the Shelves campaign, which partners with Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin to raise enough money to provide 550,000 meals to families in need, surpassed its goal. Readers donated more than \$100,000, which, combined with money from matching partners, brought the

Alan Pierre, detained by ICE in June 2025 as part of the Trump administration's crackdown on illegal immigration, is reunited with his father outside the Delaney Hall detention center in Newark, New Jersey, where supporters in the community had rallied for his release.

SETH HARRISON/USA TODAY NETWORK

campaign to more than 592,000 meals. Readers found donation links in stories about the state of hunger in Wisconsin, volunteer efforts and the ramifications of significant flooding in August, as well as an explainer for first-time food pantry users aimed at reducing anxieties.

Lawmaker pays himself rent,
then quietly returns the money

Wisconsin State Rep. Bob Donovan rented an apartment to have a mailing address within his redrawn legislative district while still maintaining his home outside the new district boundaries. He used his campaign account to reimburse himself \$850 a month for the apartment, labeling it "staff lodging." Donovan wouldn't answer questions from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, but his campaign finance reports then quietly showed a new entry paying back the money.

Green Bay schools coverage
prompts felony charges

A former Green Bay School Board member has been charged with election fraud and false swearing after a Green Bay Press-Gazette investigation by reporter Nadia Scharf. On May 8, Scharf reported that the official never lived at the address he listed on campaign filings and questioned whether he resided in the school district at all. That afternoon, he resigned. Just over four months later, on Sept. 19, the district attorney's office filed felony charges. The criminal complaint shows how Scharf's thorough reporting and persistence provided a road map for prosecutors to pursue the case.

Reporter's inquiry prompts
rapid public safety fix

A motorcyclist traveling on Outagamie County JJ in Vandebroek was forced into the outside lane and feared crashing into political signs that were in the highway right of way. He complained to the Outagamie County Highway Department, but the signs remained six months later. Frustrated, he called the Appleton Post-Crescent to see what could be done. An Appleton reporter contacted Outagamie County Highway Commissioner Dean Steingraber, and in less than an hour, Steingraber drove to the property and verified the signs were in the highway right of way, in violation of Outagamie County ordinance 54-355. Steingraber asked the property

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USA TODAY NETWORK PODCASTS

23 YEARS LATER, JUSTICE IS DONE

USA TODAY NETWORK

In April 2025, Jeffrey Abramowski walked out of jail after serving 23 years for a murder he didn't commit.

Along with Abramowski's family and friends, **Florida Today** journalist John A. Torres was waiting outside.

"I owe you my life," Abramowski told Torres. "Thank you."

If not for Torres' podcast, Murder on the Space Coast, Abramowski would probably still be in prison.

Torres' show was just one network podcast that made a difference in 2025. Others resulted in a witness recantation and a new training program for police who investigate sexual assault.

"Podcasts have already reached so many new audiences, with over half of all Americans having watched or listened to one in the past month. And, they have the potential to reach even more," said Laura Beatty, executive producer for podcasts at **USA TODAY**. "The best ones exemplify everything good about journalism and have the potential to make a tremendous impact."

Abramowski was the subject of Season 4 of Murder on the Space Coast, hosted by Torres, opinion editor and engagement editor at Florida Today, and produced by Rob Landers. The season examined the murder of Cortney "Dick" Crandall, who was bludgeoned to death in his Florida mobile home in 2002. Abramowski was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. After listening to Torres' show, which exposed numerous flaws in the investigation, a new attorney picked up the case and fought for DNA testing on the murder weapons, a hammer and an iron. The results did not incriminate Abramowski, and



his conviction was overturned.

On a bonus episode of the podcast, Torres called the day Abramowski was released "one of the most satisfying days of my life as a journalist."

The host of the podcast Murder on Music Row, **Tennessean** reporter Keith Sharon, got a phone call from the star witness in the case he and fellow host Kirsten Fiscus examined in the show's second season. The man on the phone had provided testimony against James Caveye, who was convicted in 2001 of killing 81-year-old David "Skull" Schulman inside his iconic Nashville music club, Skull's Rainbow Room.

The witness, Jason Pence, said a detective had forced him to lie on the stand.

"I got forced into stuff that I didn't want to do," Pence said on the phone call. "I got

Jeffrey Abramowski served 23 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. He was freed after a USA TODAY Network podcast, Murder on the Space Coast, exposed flaws in the investigation.

TIM SHORTT/USA TODAY NETWORK

threatened that if I said anything and didn't go along with them, I'd never see my family again or I'll come up missing."

Caveye, who was 17 at the time of the crime and is serving life in prison, hopes a new attorney will take up his case in light of the recantation and other flaws in the investigation uncovered by Sharon and Fiscus.

Caveye told Sharon he was grateful Pence finally came forward.

"Everything we've been though was all because people wanted a conviction, and they didn't care what they had to do to get it," Caveye said. "They didn't seek after the truth. They didn't even care about that."

A third USA TODAY Co. podcast prompted the creation of a new training course for police who investigate sexual assault. USA TODAY investigative reporter Gina Barton, host of the podcast Untested, taught the course with the subject of the show, Ingham County (Michigan) detective Annie Harrison.

Barton and fellow USA TODAY reporter Austin Fast, who served as executive producer, created Untested as part of a larger investigation into the problem of untested rape kits left in storage while perpetrators walked free. The podcast focused on the case against a serial sex offender who got away with abusing women for more than a decade until Harrison picked up the case.

The show revealed the flaws in previous investigations and included interviews with experts about how to do better. Harrison and Barton drew on those interviews and on Harrison's experience to create an interactive training seminar, which they presented to Michigan police in 2025. They are scheduled to lead the course at two more law enforcement conferences in 2026, including End Violence Against Women International.

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owner to remove the signs. The signs were moved out of the right of way, improving public safety.

City alters waiver, hotline hours after bilingual reporting

Bilingual **Detroit Free Press** reporting held city officials accountable after mass flooding in southwest Detroit displaced businesses and residents who are primarily Spanish-speaking. The reporting prompted the city to make a promised hotline operate 24/7 and revise a liability waiver that residents were required to sign before repairs. The Free Press worked with attorneys to analyze the waiver and partnered with bilingual news source El Central to distribute translated explanations to residents.

Investigations trigger ethics overhaul proposals in Michigan

Detroit Free Press investigations uncovered conflicts of interest among Oakland County officials, including votes by the county board chair on matters tied to his private consulting work. The reporting also identified conflicts involving multiple commissioners. After publication, three commissioners called for an inquiry, the county executive proposed sweeping ethics reforms, and a state lawmaker introduced legislation expanding ethics and transparency requirements for county leaders. Officials publicly credited the Free Press with driving the response: "I also want to acknowledge the important role investigative journalism has played in bringing these issues to the forefront," said County Commissioner Kristen Nelson.

Reporting turns hidden prison deaths into \$10 million safety action

Detroit Free Press reporting used the Michigan Freedom of Information Act to document at least five fatal jumps or falls from low railings at two Jackson-area prisons since 2020, plus additional nonfatal incidents. The reporting revealed that the Michigan Department of Corrections had not publicly disclosed the deaths and that a state safety investigation found the railings failed to meet standards but resulted in no action. After the Free Press exposed three additional unreported deaths, the Michigan Legislature approved \$10 million to improve railing safety at the facilities.

Reporting reshapes oversight after \$44 million theft scandal

After a former CFO of the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy was convicted of stealing at least \$44 million, the **Detroit Free Press** reported on governance failures, including an oversized board, lack of term limits, and long-term reliance on a single auditor. The conservancy implemented reforms aligned with the reporting, including rotating auditors, shrinking the board, limiting terms, and creating a whistleblower policy and ethics hotline.



Lake Michigan is the deadliest lake in America for swimmers, statistics have shown, yet there were no lifeguards at 99% of Michigan's public beaches. Months after the **Detroit Free Press** reported on the dangers, the beach town of South Haven voted to approve a lifeguard program after years of stalled efforts. MANDI WRIGHT/USA TODAY NETWORK

Reporting exposes PPO gaps, spurs legislative fix

After a hospital worker was killed by her ex-husband despite having obtained a personal protection order, or PPO, that was never served, the **Detroit Free Press** reported that Michigan law places the burden and cost of PPO service on victims. The reporting showed Michigan lagged behind other states. In response, lawmakers introduced legislation to remove the burden from victims and make PPOs free.

Michigan school district agrees to end seclusion after investigation

An investigation by the **Detroit Free Press** found that Montcalm County Intermediate School District isolated students with disabilities more than 4,000 times over five school years, more than any district in Michigan at the time. After the reporting, the U.S. Justice Department launched an investigation. The district later agreed in a settlement to end the practice.

Reporting exposes racial disparities in police shootings

A **Detroit Free Press** investigation found at least 20% of shootings by Detroit officers over a decade started with nonviolent stops and escalated with foot chases. About half began with minor vehicle violations. All of the people identified in the Free Press review who were stopped for nonviolent offenses, and later shot, were Black men younger than 33. After publication, members of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners said they

were exploring ways to limit certain police-citizen contacts tied to profiling.

Investigation leads to lifeguard approval in beach town

This **Detroit Free Press** investigation showed that Lake Michigan is the deadliest lake in America, yet neither the state nor public beach towns along the lakeshore invest money in lifeguards even as they rake in millions from tourists who visit these dangerous waters. Months after the story was published, the popular beach town of South Haven voted to approve a lifeguard program for 2026 after years of stalled advocacy.

City drops lawsuit after scrutiny of uneven enforcement

Detroit Free Press reporting raised questions about the legality and uneven enforcement of the city's nuisance abatement program after highlighting selective lawsuits against one property owner while nearby blighted properties went untouched. After the coverage, the city dropped its lawsuit against the owner.

Door-to-door voter guides lift turnout in Detroit precincts

As part of an opinion series on low voter turnout, the **Detroit Free Press** distributed printed voter guides – typically available only online – deploying delivery carriers, Free Press staff members and community volunteers to seven neighborhoods with chronically low turnout. In every targeted precinct, participation increased; one precinct saw 26% of former nonvoters casting ballots in the election.

News coverage draws federal, state attention to teen's death

The **Detroit Free Press** reported exclusively on a teenager's death while a passenger in a high-speed crash, revealing that police used Life360 data to show the driver's mother knew her son routinely drove recklessly but did not intervene. The reporting

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FIRST AMENDMENT REPORTING

JOURNALISTS SPUR OUTRAGE, REVERSALS

USA TODAY NETWORK

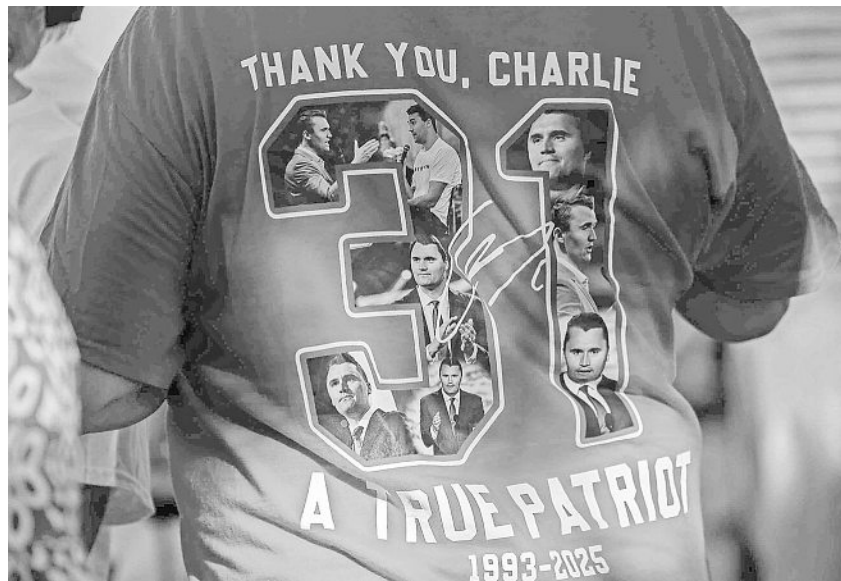
This past fall – shortly after a free-speech nonprofit named Indiana University as the worst violator of speech protections in higher education – Indiana’s flagship university pressured the adviser and student editors at the Indiana Daily Student newspaper to cease publishing news in print. After push-back, the university fired the adviser and ordered the paper to stop printing within 24 hours.

IndyStar First Amendment reporter Cate Charron and **Herald-Times** reporter Brian Rosenzweig jumped into action and scooped the student newspaper on its own story. Charron and Rosenzweig reported a dozen stories, including ones detailing closed-door meetings with administrators, exposing issues with a large celebrity donation and explaining a resulting lawsuit.

Their reporting triggered national outrage, which pressured administrators to publish an open letter and reinstate the print paper. Multiple alumni also told **IndyStar** they pulled donations totaling well over \$1 million from the university as a result.

Charron’s reporting stems from a newly expanded **USA TODAY Network** cohort funded through a collaboration between the Freedom Forum and Journalism Funding Partners. These five reporters are tasked with explaining the intricacies of our First Amendment rights and investigating how they are evolving and under threat.

Their presence has met the moment and



A person wears a shirt commemorating Charlie Kirk at an event marking Kirk’s birthday in Jupiter, Florida, on Oct. 14. The Turning Point USA founder’s assassination on Sept. 10 spawned debate about First Amendment freedoms.

THOMAS CORDY/
USA TODAY NETWORK

engaged readers. Since the expansion in May, the team has vigorously covered the surge of firings after Charlie Kirk’s killing, the weight of public media cuts, the federal government’s veiled threats toward ABC and Jimmy Kimmel, book-banning campaigns, the increasing pressure on journalists and other First Amendment issues.

USA TODAY reporter BrieAnna Frank kept an eye on the impact of the Trump administration’s efforts to make substantive changes to the Smithsonian, ban flag burning, deport foreign-born student protesters and clamp down on speech criti-

cal of the administration. Her coverage has graced several front covers of **USA TODAY** and been mentioned on Hillary Clinton’s X account.

Arizona Republic reporter Taylor Seely has detailed a city’s crackdown on public gatherings, a conservative state Supreme Court justice’s warning about the Trump administration and shifting religious sentiments following Kirk’s killing. Her work has deeply resonated with her community, evidenced by a story about a lawsuit challenging a student’s suspension for making a joke that garnered thousands of reader interactions.

In Nashville, **Tennessean** reporter Angele Latham created the most detailed book ban tracking database of its kind, dove into how a lawsuit could upend a rule against churches making political endorsements and followed the impact of immigration enforcement on her community. Latham also broke a story about a man arrested for posting on Facebook about Kirk. Her continuing coverage contributed to a pressure campaign, including a state lawmaker sending her reporting to the district attorney, that ultimately led to his release.

In Florida, reporter Stephany Matat has closely watched and reported on a bevy of Trump administration lawsuits and several of Gov. Ron DeSantis’ contentious ideological decisions. She has broken First Amendment-related news, including teacher license revocations, worker firings, police visits and rule changes.

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prompted formal reviews by the Michigan Attorney General’s Office and the Attorney Grievance Commission. It also sparked public debate within the justice system about parental accountability and highlighted an existing law allowing private prosecutions. The coverage moved the case beyond a local tragedy, triggering official scrutiny and broader examination of legal responsibility in cases involving parental knowledge of dangerous behavior.

Ticket bonus plan scrapped after reporting exposes profiling risks

Reporter Josh Wood of **The Courier Journal** in Louisville listened to hours of audio from the commissioner meetings in the tiny (population about 1,500) Kentucky city of Worthington Hills. He had been tipped that the city’s mayor and its head of security – an off-duty Louisville police officer – planned to pay bonuses to officers for writing tickets and making arrests. The proposal, which the head of security said would incentivize officers to pull over “criminal-looking people,” raised flags about pretextual stops and racial profiling. Wood’s story posted the day of the meeting to approve the plan, but after a heated meeting during which the story was at the forefront, the plan was scrapped.

Repeated warnings ignored before 5-year-old’s fatal abuse

Five-year-old Zara Arnold was abused for years by her father, despite her mother’s repeated pleas for help. On May 19, Zara’s father admitted killing her in a series of brutal assaults. **IndyStar** reporters detailed failures by Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) and public safety officials that preceded Zara’s death. Zara’s father had full custody of the girl, despite a 2020 investigation that substantiated abuse. Six subsequent abuse allegations made to child services agency were not proven, and the judge overseeing the custody case ordered Zara’s mother to stop reporting her concerns to the police and the agency. In the days leading to Zara’s death, Indianapolis police were contacted at least twice with concerns but failed to do a welfare check. On May 29, the Indianapolis police union called on state and federal leaders to investigate the institutions that failed to protect the girl.

Stadium deal scrutiny prompts more transparency

The Hamilton county commissioner initially pledged public hearings on any stadium deal with the Cincinnati Bengals. A deal was reached without holding hearings. The **Cincinnati Enquirer** called that out, and commissioners scheduled a public meeting on the agreement and created an online portal for the public to leave comments.

School board candidate drops bid after Enquirer probe

A Cincinnati suburban school board candidate suspended her campaign after a **Cincinnati Enquirer** investigation revealed police had responded twice to her home to break up unsupervised teen parties involving underage drinking. **Enquirer** reporter Erin Glynn painstakingly followed up on tips about the parties at the home of Forest Hills Board of Education candidate Jodi Harding by collecting public records and police video.



Avery Russell, center, with her grandmother, Helena Thigpen, left, and mother, Drew Russell, listen as Ohio lawmakers vote on House Bill 247 at the Statehouse in Columbus Nov. 19, 2025. Named Avery’s Law, the legislation calls for more accountability for owners of dangerous dogs and mandatory euthanasia for dogs that kill or seriously injure people. The USA TODAY Network-Ohio had shed light on victims’ experiences with dog attacks. SAMANTHA MADAR/USA TODAY NETWORK

‘Vicious’ dog project leads to changes in Ohio law

USA TODAY Network’s Ohio journalists produced an investigation into how the state’s laws on dangerous dogs fail to hold owners accountable and often leave victims without justice. The project, published in March 2025, used photos, maps, documentaries and reporting built around victims’ experiences, including a 12-year-old Columbus girl whose case became central to the accountability gap. Within weeks, Ohio lawmakers began debating Avery’s Law. By November, the bill passed unanimously in both houses of the General Assembly. Gov. Mike DeWine signed it in December and sent one of the signing pens to lead reporter Laura Bischoff, calling the work an “important and impactful investigation.”

Glynn’s reporting also revealed that a 17-year-old girl reported she was raped at one of the parties.

Report on assault allegation forces schools to investigate

Akron Public Schools waited months to begin investigating a sexual assault complaint filed by a female employee against a male coworker who had been supervising her work crew. **Akron Beacon Journal** reporter Kelli Weir found the delay violated district policy requiring timely investigations and completions within 31 days. One week after publication, the district placed the male employee on paid administrative leave and hired an outside agency to investigate the complaint.

ICE detention story exposes gulf between data, rhetoric

Using public records and ICE data, **The Cincinnati Enquirer** examined Butler County Jail’s role as the region’s primary ICE detention site and reported that 7 of 10 detainees had no criminal convictions. After publication, residents attended the next Butler County commissioners meeting to raise concerns. The reporting produced a verifiable community response and moved the issue into an official public forum, even prompting an election official to question the mismatch between rhetoric and documented detention data.

Series honors lives of Milwaukee children lost to violence

When violence claimed enough Milwaukee Public Schools students in one year to fill a classroom, **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel** reporters Cleo Krejci and David Clarey made the case that each student had a story that deserved to be told. They interviewed families, teachers and community leaders, reporting on the complicated realities of protecting kids and highlighting a dozen local solutions. MPS’ superintendent praised the project during a panel a few days after publication. “I’m so grateful to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel for memorializing the lives of these children, because they matter,” she said. “These children mattered.”

OSU arts director resigns after mismanagement investigated

After reporting in 2024 on turmoil at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, **The Columbus Dispatch** continued investigating allegations that the executive director, Gaëtane Verna, was mismanaging the institution, driving out staff and worsening financial instability. A year later, follow-up reporting detailed continued staff and board turnover and deepening concerns about leadership and finances. Five days after the second story was published, Verna resigned.

‘VANISHED’ series leads to bipartisan missing-persons bill

The **Columbus Dispatch** investigation “VANISHED” found Ohio law enforcement agencies rarely use available tools to locate missing people, including inconsistent use of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). The series documented that agencies failed to enter hundreds of missing-person cases into the federal database, even though it has helped solve more than 46,000 cases. In response, state lawmakers introduced House Bill 217, the FIND Act, requiring agencies to enter missing-person information into NamUs within 30 days of a report.

Lansing overhauls spending controls in wake of employee abuses

A **Lansing State Journal** investigation exposed widespread misuse of city-issued credit cards, building on records obtained after a police sergeant’s embezzlement conviction. Reporting revealed that more than 100 city employees, including senior officials, had access to cards with little oversight and missing receipts. After the findings were published, city leaders sharply reduced the number of cards and replaced them with an invoice-based approval system. The changes marked a significant overhaul of spending controls and directly addressed weaknesses identified through the reporting.

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IMMIGRATION COVERAGE

STORIES SHINE LIGHT ON DETAINEES

Duane W. Gang
USA TODAY

USA TODAY's coverage of immigration and the increased enforcement by the Trump administration has resonated with readers and led to real-world change.

USA TODAY immigration and border reporter Lauren Villagran started the year off with an inside look, the day before President Donald Trump's inauguration, of the challenges he would face in trying to deport as many people as promised. Despite Trump's actions and rhetoric, the effort has faced the challenges Villagran outlined in this story.

In March, Villagran detailed how even people married or engaged to U.S. citizens were being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement as the administration ramped up its deportation efforts.

Those included families like Bardley Bartell and Camila Muñoz. Bartell voted for Trump and for the promise of a tougher stance on "criminal illegal immigrants."

The couple had a familiar small-town love story and a two-year courtship before they married. They had taken a belated honeymoon to Puerto Rico in February – unaware that her decision to overstay a work-study visa during the pandemic lockdown five years ago could land her in ICE detention. It did.

But 49 days later – after USA TODAY told Bardley and Camila's story – she was freed from detention.

Villagran also detailed the conditions for women within ICE detention and reported



on a Harvard scientist detained over allegations she didn't properly declare nonhazardous biological samples on her return from a trip to Europe.

Rather than withholding the samples and issuing a fine, U.S. Customs and Border Protection canceled her J-1 scholar visa and detained her. She was turned over to ICE, sent to a processing center in Vermont and then transferred to the Richwood Correctional Center in Monroe, Louisiana.

To help ease her time in detention, her Harvard roommate and fellow scientist called late at night and played piano to her over the phone. Bach or Chopin – all until the jail line clicks off at the 15-minute mark.

In July, Villagran was the first national

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers James and John, who are twins, transport an undocumented Mexican migrant to a processing facility in Kansas City, Missouri, on Nov. 19. The man, who was brought to the United States when he was 2, was placed in removal proceedings.

OMAR ORNELAS/
USA TODAY NETWORK

reporter to do a deep dive on the detention facilities in Louisiana and why they were suddenly receiving high-profile detainees. She drove hundreds of miles across the state and reported from the tarmac of the nation's top deportation airport in Alexandria.

Then, in October, Villagran had two important stories. The first featured a family of eight, including seven American citizens, dependent on the income of one man brought to the U.S. as a child and then abandoned by his family. The man was expected to be detained at his next court date, but after the story ran, he was allowed to leave his check-in.

Villagran also obtained a week's menu served at a detention center in Louisiana, providing a rare glimpse into the lives of detained immigrant women and how they are fed. She and our graphics and visuals team recreated the meals to drive home their quantity and quality. After the story was published, detainees reported a noticeable improvement in food quality.

Finally, in December, Villagran and colleague Trevor Hughes went behind the scenes with ICE agents in Kansas City, Missouri – including telling the story of a father, his twin sons and daughter and why they all decided to work for the agency, offering an unusually detailed behind-the-scenes look at how ICE operates.

This exclusive window provided readers with a more complete picture of the motivations and daily lives of those on the front lines of Trump's immigration enforcement campaign.

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Story on possible wrongful conviction leads to tip on real culprit

A story about former prosecutors trying to prove a convicted man's innocence led to the discovery of new evidence. Shortly after the **Indianapolis Star** published its story, reporters received an anonymous tip naming a different man as the suspect. A hearing was held to introduce new pieces of evidence, including the testimony of a Howard County detective who said John Turner, the convicted man, was not the person in the surveillance footage of the robbery. A Marion County judge is expected to rule on whether Turner should get a new trial considering the new evidence.

Coverage prompts Indiana to restrict taxpayer-funded luxury vehicles

Indiana Gov. Mike Braun quickly signed a bill to curb state officials' use of taxpayer-funded luxury vehicles after the **IndyStar** reported that the Indiana secretary of state and Indiana lieutenant governor were driving luxury SUVs. The bill moved with bipartisan support among state lawmakers.

IndyStar probe finds 'Mr. Clean' mayor ignored conflicts

The Indianapolis mayor's reputation for ethics was once so pristine that a government watchdog group labeled him "Mr. Clean." But an **IndyStar** investigation, in partnership with Mirror Indy, showed the mayor ignored conflicts of interest involving millions of dollars in city incentives. One person who especially benefited? The mayor's former top aide, who was featured in an earlier **IndyStar** investigation. The reporting prompted a strong reaction from local city officials and neighborhood leaders.

SOUTH

RV site for displaced Helene victims closes after investigation

In a monthslong series, the **Citizen Times** of Asheville, North Carolina, investigated Haven on the Hill, a temporary Helene disaster relief site that drew allegations of fraud, exploitation, sexual assault and rape. Residents there said that they were subject to unfair evictions and that the site operator, James Lunsford, was stealing donations. Journalist Will Hofmann reported that Lunsford claimed Haven was a nonprofit, but it had never been established as one and raised more than \$117,000 on GoFundMe. Subsequent stories highlighted a pattern of abuse, including reports of sexual assault. In May, after a man was arrested at the site, charged in the rape and kidnapping of a woman in a metal box for nearly two months, donations froze. Haven's GoFundMe campaign was removed after the **Citizen Times** coverage was published. Separately, Lunsford faces six felonies in a federal investigation into illegal arms transactions in 2024.

Lost civil rights voices restored for future generations

In 2005, the **Montgomery Advertiser** recorded video interviews with participants in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and others



Buddy Busch tends to the gravesite of his wife, Patti, at Wilson Cemetery in Newark, Ohio. Patti Busch died in 2023 of lung cancer linked to radon exposure.

SAMANTHA MADAR/
USA TODAY NETWORK

'Invisible Killer' radon series triggers surge in testing

After **The Columbus Dispatch** published the investigation "Invisible Killer" about Ohio's radon threat, thousands requested free radon tests from the state. The project found government failures that leave residents at higher risk despite dangerous radon levels in every county. It examined radon in schools, public housing and possible ties to fracking. With grant support, **The Dispatch** tested 68 homes and found 79% had unsafe radon levels. Grants also funded 25 continuous radon monitors that are available through Columbus libraries.

who helped dismantle bus segregation – many of whom have since died. For more than a decade, the footage was stored on inaccessible technology and feared lost. After photojournalist Mickey Welsh located the original recordings, he and his Montgomery Advertiser colleagues partnered with the USA TODAY Network's video team to restore, re-edit and preserve each interview. Released alongside the Advertiser's live coverage of the boycott's 70th anniversary, the videos have sparked renewed community conversation and will remain a public resource for years to come.

Mountain resort blocked after Greenville News coverage

Greenville News reporting examined plans for a luxury resort on Paris Mountain, detailing environmental risks and community opposition. The coverage highlighted flaws in the developer's outreach and questioned claims of institutional support. After the stories were published, more than 800 residents attended a public meeting to oppose the project. County officials rejected the development proposal, and Greenville County Council later expanded environmental zoning protections for the mountain. The reporting helped mobilize public opposition and preceded both the resort project's defeat and strengthened land-use protections.

Investigative series reveals misspent tax dollars, leads to charges

Knox County put in place tighter tracking, auditing and oversight of spending by elected officials and their staffs after a **Knoxville News Sentinel** series of investigative reports detailed how some officials spent extravagantly on luxury hotel stays, drove public vehicles for personal use and used inside information to profit on flipping homes slated to be auctioned. Tennessee's Office of the Comptroller, the state's watchdog agency, launched a parallel investigation and ended

up charging two Knox County public officials with felony misconduct in office, independently verifying the reporters' work showing county residents how public officials were abusing their trust.

School board reverses decision to halt athletics

A **Tuscaloosa News** reporter was tipped off that the county school board planned to discontinue athletics at a school. Anna Snyder got the story and called the school board for comment, prompting it to announce the change in an email quickly sent to parents. The initial report created such outrage that the school board announced at a meeting five days after the first story was published that it had reversed its decision, restoring the future of athletics at the school.

Virginia ends juvenile shackling in courtrooms

In 2024, the **News Leader** in Staunton, Virginia, detailed the seemingly humiliating and unnecessary practice of all shackling juvenile defendants in the courtroom. At the time, Virginia was one of only 11 states in the country to continue the practice. A local advocate and attorney in the city's public defender's office played a key role in new legislation that ended the practice when it took effect July 1, 2025.

Coverage helps pass bipartisan anti-development law

A 60-day advocacy campaign by the **USA TODAY Network-Florida Opinion Group** helped drive passage of a unanimous Florida Legislature bill protecting all 175 state parks from development, including hotels, golf courses and pickleball courts. Lawmakers and environmental advocates credited the coverage with mobilizing public pressure and keeping the issue front and center. The

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law represents Florida's most significant anti-development legislation in nearly two decades.

Investigation forces youth sports leader to resign

The (Fort Myers) News-Press and Naples Daily News revealed that a Pop Warner football conference president had been charged with sexual battery for performing "virginity checks" on a teen girl, later pleading down to battery and surrendering his medical license. Within a week of publication, he resigned. Pop Warner, which oversees hundreds of youth programs nationwide, announced a review of its background check procedures.

Coverage sparks protests, scrutiny, eventual park closure

Panama City News-Herald reporting exposed safety concerns and operational problems at Gulf World Marine Park, triggering protests and public outrage. After a series of dolphin deaths and mounting scrutiny, the aquarium closed. Its parent company declared bankruptcy, remaining animals were relocated, and local, state and federal agencies took action.

Investigation forces changes to nonprofit pay practices

A Palm Beach Post investigation found executives at MorseLife, the area's largest assisted living nonprofit, received tens of millions in compensation, including \$36 million over four years. After donor and resident backlash, the organization changed its compensation plan, ending a practice that tied executive pay to overall revenue.

Viral arrest video leads to officer's resignation

The Daytona Beach News-Journal reported that Edgewater, Florida, police officer Daniel Rippeon was on patrol one night when he came upon a man hanging out in front of a CVS drugstore just after closing. Rippeon decided the man was suspicious and threatened him before arresting him. It turned out the man had just finished his shift at the store and was waiting for a ride home. Rippeon's body camera footage went viral, the charge against the man was dropped, and after continued news coverage, the officer resigned.

Video and reporting force dropped charge

The Palm Beach Post reported on the arrest of an 18-year-old U.S. citizen who filmed police using a Taser on landscaping coworkers and mocking his pleas for rights. Prosecutors later dropped an obstruction charge against the man, citing insufficient evidence. The coverage prompted discussion at a county commission meeting and scrutiny of immigration enforcement practices.

Reporting leads to refunds for overcharged tenants

A Palm Beach Post investigation uncovered widespread overcharging at a rent-controlled workforce housing complex. The reporting prompted a county inspector general audit that confirmed \$32,000 in overpayments to 39 tenants and led to refunds.

Coverage ignites opposition, halts national park proposal

After the Daytona Beach News-Journal reported on a proposal to convert the Ocala National Forest into a national park, public backlash was swift. Thousands signed a petition opposing the change, and the congressman behind the idea abandoned the proposal.

Reporting leads city to fix dangerous crosswalk

Panama City News-Herald coverage of a fatal pedestrian crash highlighted dangers at a specific crosswalk. Residents organized a protest, and the city agreed to install a flashing safety light.

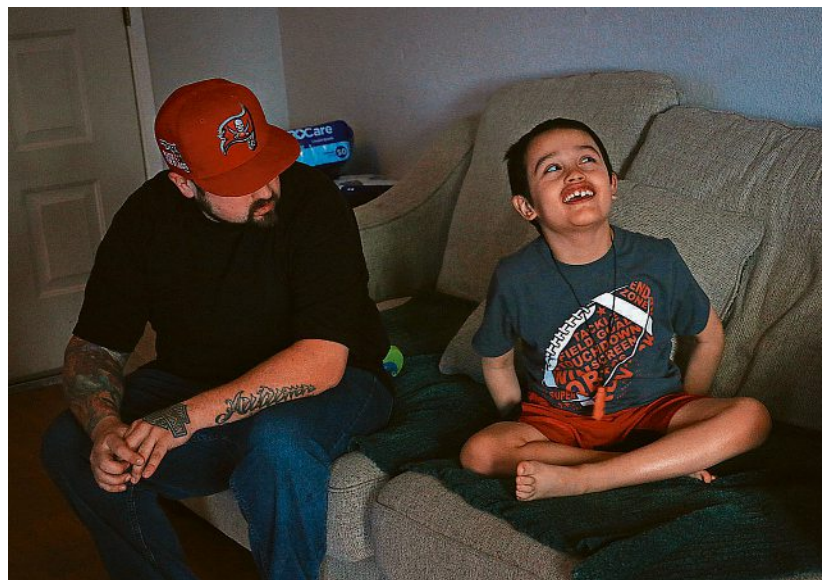
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Reporting leads to unanimous squatter law overhaul

The Statesman Journal highlighted gaps in Oregon law that left homeowners unable to quickly remove squatters, sometimes forcing residents to pay squatters to leave. The coverage ran as lawmakers debated reforms and documented the real-world consequences of inaction. After the reporting, both chambers of the Oregon Legislature unanimously passed House Bill 3522, simplifying the eviction process for property owners dealing with squatters. The law took effect Jan. 1, 2026. The reporting directly informed the legislative debate and preceded a rare unanimous overhaul of state law.



After the Statesman Journal of Salem, Oregon, reported on residents' concern over ICE activity in Woodburn, the City Council declared an emergency and requested state aid for families and businesses. ABIGAIL DOLLINS/USA TODAY NETWORK



Darian Garcia with his son Rico, who has autism, at home in Spanish Springs, Nevada. JASON BEAN/USA TODAY NETWORK

Coverage helps pass paid caregiver bill for trained parents

The Reno Gazette Journal reporting highlighted that Nevada had thousands of profoundly autistic children but no residential facilities, forcing families into severe financial and emotional strain. Lawmakers passed a bill allowing properly trained parents to become paid caregivers for children with profound disabilities. A parent featured in the coverage credited the reporting with helping persuade lawmakers to pass the bill.

Investigation leads police to cancel surveillance contracts

The Register-Guard in Eugene, Oregon, used public records and expert analysis to show that local police were using Flock Safety cameras without realizing the company's license-plate data could be searched by the Department of Homeland Security and out-of-state agencies. (Oregon's Sanctuary Promise Act forbids local and state police from aiding in federal immigration enforcement.) After Eugene and Springfield ended their contracts, the Register-Guard reported on data access, system flaws and a state lawmaker's working group to craft automated license plate reader regulations. Within hours, a third public safety agency ended its Flock contract, citing pending legislation.

Investigation forces cities to rethink eviction policies

The Arizona Republic found that "crime-free housing" programs allowed tenants to be evicted without charges or convictions and did not reduce crime. The investigation showed how sweeping lease addendums enabled housing loss based on allegations alone. After publication, Tucson, Tempe and Flagstaff directed police to reevaluate the programs and update officer training. Arizona's attorney general began reviewing whether the policies violate state or federal law, and lawmakers started work on legislation to curb the practice and revive a Tenant Bill of Rights. The reporting directly triggered policy reviews, legal scrutiny and legislative action.

Coverage prompts smuggling warnings to students

After The Arizona Republic investigated Arizona Christian University football players caught in a human smuggling scheme and released without criminal charges, ACU changed internal practices: Coaches began warning athletes, the student handbook was updated, and campus security now educates students and parents each semester about cartel recruitment via social media. Arizona's superintendent of public instruction echoed the call for schools statewide to take similar steps. Glendale directed law enforcement to explore education and prevention efforts. The reporting also helped revive bipartisan support for federal legislation targeting cartel recruiting on social media.

Reporting forces NFL to tighten charity requirements

After years of accountability reporting by The Arizona Republic on waste and mismanagement in charities founded by award winners, the NFL announced it would ensure those charities comply with basic nonprofit laws. The change followed an offseason discussion in which NFL vice president Troy Vincent learned from The Republic that the

past two Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year winners had charities noncompliant with nonprofit laws and that his own nonprofit's corporate status had been revoked for more than a decade.

Coverage leads city to declare state of emergency

After the Statesman Journal of Salem, Oregon, reported on documented-resident fears and business losses tied to increased ICE activity, Woodburn's City Council declared a state of emergency and authorized \$30,000 to address the concerns. The resolution also requested state assistance for families and small businesses, expanded access to food, housing, and mental health services, support for local providers, and coordination to ensure compliance with Oregon's sanctuary laws.

Instructor dropped from future classes after coverage

The Arizona Republic reported that a community college theater instructor encouraged female students to strip during a midterm while classmates watched. Reporting showed concerns had been raised internally and explored the instructor's history, including past allegations tied to a youth theater group. After the coverage intensified, the instructor's name was removed from future class schedules. An internal review continued, though a Title IX investigation cleared him.

Reporting triggers renewed investigations into high school hazing

After students reported sexual hazing and said school leaders and police failed to respond, The Arizona Republic's reporting prompted swift action. The school district placed the coach on leave and reopened its investigation. Police also reopened their investigation. The reporting helped the victims go public with their experiences.

Reporting sparks investigation into remote work abuse

A Reno Gazette Journal investigation at the beginning of 2025 found that the information technology chief was still living in Southern California four years after being hired. Reporters used security-entry data to show the county's IT chief averaged just under five days a month at Reno offices despite assurances to county commissioners that he would be present more often. After publication, Washoe County commissioners called for an investigation into employee work-from-home practices.

News reports cited in lawmakers' call for DOT overhaul

The Statesman Journal of Salem, Oregon, examined what Oregon achieved under a 2017 transportation funding bill and scrutinized the agency's accountability. Lawmakers cited the reporting on the Oregon House floor while pushing for reform. A later special session produced a \$4.3 billion funding package with accountability measures. ODOT's director announced his resignation amid agency turmoil.

Republic helps kill bill allowing claims for campaign money

Arizona Republic reporting examined a bill that would have allowed candidates or family members to claim unspent political donations as unclaimed property. Arizona Senate President Warren Petersen had acknowledged the idea for the bill came after the death of his sister, a former Queen Creek Town Council member who died in 2023 and left \$19,600 in her campaign account. After the reporting, the bill was rewritten in the Arizona House and ultimately died.