

# IMPACT REPORT JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Winner of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service



# Our Mission

ProPublica exposes abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by governments, businesses and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.

## Who We Are

We are an independent, nonprofit news organization that produces investigative journalism with moral force. Our journalists dig deep into important issues, shining a light on abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust. Our reporting has contributed to the passage of new laws; reversals of harmful policies and practices; and accountability for leaders at local, state and national levels.

ProPublica was founded in 2008 to fill a growing hole in journalism: Newsrooms are shrinking, and legacy funding models are failing. Deep-dive reporting like ours is slow and expensive, and investigative journalism is a luxury in many newsrooms today — but it remains as critical as ever to democracy and our civic life.

Today, over 15 years (and seven Pulitzer Prizes) later, ProPublica has built one of the largest investigative newsrooms in the country, with a team of more than 150 editorial staffers — based in New York and working from state and regional offices in the Midwest, South, Southwest, Northwest and Texas — entirely devoted to investigative reporting.

## How We Work

As a nonprofit, ProPublica's work is powered primarily through donations. The vast bulk of the money we spend goes directly into world-class, award-winning journalism. We are committed to uncovering the truth, no matter how long it takes or how much it costs, and we practice transparent financial reporting so donors know how their dollars are spent.

ProPublica regularly collaborates with other news organizations to report and publish our journalism, extending the reach of each story and maximizing impact. We also have nearly 40 journalists based around the country contributing to regional and local accountability reporting, ensuring people can benefit from journalism that can drive measurable change in their communities.

Our Local Reporting Network launched in 2018 to give local news organizations, which have been particularly hard hit by the decline in local journalism, the opportunity to tackle big, yearlong investigative stories that are crucial to their communities. Selected reporters work in and report to their home newsrooms while receiving extensive support and guidance from ProPublica.



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Evecutive Summary

Cover: Marvin Cotton Jr. spent nearly two decades in prison before his murder conviction was overturned. He then faced a second legal battle when the state of Michigan challenged his claim for financial compensation. Sarahbeth Maney/ProPublica

This page: ProPublica reporters, seated from left, Alex Mierjeski, Justin Elliott, Kirsten Berg, Joshua Kaplan and Brett Murphy celebrate with staff after receiving the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for public service. Sarahbeth Maney/ProPublica

## Investigative Journalism With Moral Force

On May 6, ProPublica won the Pulitzer Prize for public service for the "Friends of the Court" investigative series, the board's highest honor. The citation noted that the stories had uncovered "how a small group of politically influential billionaires wooed justices with lavish gifts and travel, pushing the Court to adopt its first code of conduct." The award was ProPublica's seventh Pulitzer in 16 years of operation. Senior editor Jesse Eisinger, the leader of the reporting team, said ProPublica's philanthropic model and mission of pursuing change through journalism were key factors in the success of a project that began with open-ended questions about the ethics of judges.

Addressing reporters and editors over videoconference and in our New York office, Eisinger said:

"What buoys me is that everyone in this room knows that our work is undoubtedly about more than prizes. We are in a privileged position in this world. We can orient ourselves entirely around the search for truth. We aren't perfect, and we don't have a monopoly on the truth, but we care about it more than any other value. It's a dangerous moment for our profession, the most dangerous of my lifetime, and I think in the country's modern history. But I remind myself that we have no loyalties, belong to no groups, call for no prescriptions, believe in no creeds above the truth. And for that, I am grateful."

The Pulitzer board also recognized a collaboration between The Texas Tribune, ProPublica and FRONT-LINE as a finalist in the explanatory reporting category. The investigation, focusing on the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, revealed that states across the country are providing devastatingly insufficient training for law enforcement to confront a mass shooter. At least 37 states have laws mandating that schools conduct active shooter-related drills — all but four annually. As a result, there are critical and long-overlooked gaps in preparedness between children and the officers expected to protect them.

ProPublica and the Tribune are still <u>engaged in a lawsuit</u> alongside more than a dozen other news organizations to compel Texas to release public records about the incident.

There's other important impact from our reporting to share. After a joint investigation by ProPublica and the Idaho Statesman, the Idaho Legislature approved a record \$2 billion to repair crumbling schools. Idaho spends less per student than almost any other state, and the results have been devastating.

Additionally, an investigation by ProPublica and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette revealed that Philips Respironics' breathing machines could spew hazardous particles and fumes into the masks of patients. The company halted sales of all sleep apnea devices and ventilators in the United States after our story came out.

Also, the EPA issued a rule to slash toxic emissions from facilities that release ethylene oxide, labeled by the agency as "one of the most potent cancer-causing chemicals," after our 2021 investigative series mapped toxic air pollutants nationwide.

Our search for the truth continues. Thank you for your trust and for supporting this essential mission.





Robin Sparkman, President

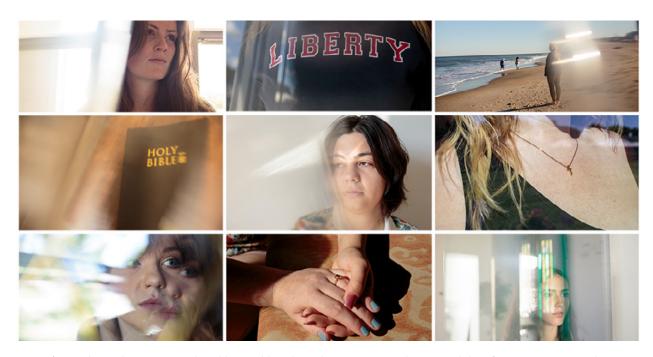


Stepher Engelly

Stephen Engelberg, Editor-in-Chief



## **Education**



Some of more than a dozen women who told ProPublica that Liberty University discouraged them from reporting sexual assaults. Sarah Blesener for ProPublica

# Idaho Legislature Approves \$2B for School Repairs

Spurred by our reporting, the Idaho Legislature approved \$2 billion for school districts to repair and replace aging and overcrowded buildings — an amount they said would mark the largest investment in school facilities in state history. Last year, ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Idaho Statesman revealed that Idaho spends less, per student, on schools than any other state, and that restrictive policies created a funding crisis that's left rural schools with collapsing roofs, deteriorating foundations and freezing classrooms. Citing our reporting, Gov. Brad Little announced in his January State of the State address that he wanted to make funding for school facilities "priority No. 1." The new bill will redirect \$500 million from other programs in addition to providing new funding, bringing the total value to \$2 billion over 10 years.

# **DOE Hits Liberty University With Historic \$14M Fine**

Spurred by a ProPublica investigation, the federal Department of Education has announced an historic \$14 million fine against Liberty University for failing to properly handle reports of sexual assault and other campus safety issues. The DOE concluded that the Christian evangelical university had fundamentally failed to support victims of violence as required by law. Our 2021 investigation revealed how school officials had discouraged and dismissed women who tried to come forward with accounts of sexual assault, threatening them with punishment for breaking the university's strict moral code, known as "The Liberty Way." Our reporting sparked widespread outrage and demands by U.S. senators for the DOE to investigate. In response to the government's report, Liberty University said in a statement that it faced "unfair treatment." But the school also admitted to mistakes and committed to spending \$2 million to improve campus safety.

## Health



A sign in front of one of Philips Respironics factories in Murrysville, Pennsylvania. Benjamin B. Braun/Post-Gazette

## Philips Halts Sale of Breathing Machines in U.S.

An <u>ongoing investigation</u> by ProPublica and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette revealed that Philips Respironics kept secret more than 3,700 complaints over 11 years about its popular CPAP machines, despite evidence that the devices could spew hazardous particles and fumes into the masks of patients. The company did not launch a recall until 2021. In a statement to the news organizations, Philips said that its top priority is patient safety and that it regretted "the distress and concern" caused by the recall.

■ In January, Philips Respironics announced that it will stop manufacturing and selling all sleep apnea devices and ventilators in the United States under a settlement with the federal government that will essentially end the company's reign as one of the top makers of breathing machines in the country. It could be years before the company can resume sales.

- Under a <u>consent decree</u> with the Department of Justice filed in April, the company must hire an independent safety monitor, undergo regular facility inspections for five years and pay part of its revenue to the federal government. It will also face a review of its testing on the millions of replacement machines that it sent to customers after the old ones were recalled in 2021.
- Also in April, Philips agreed to pay more than \$1 billion to settle lawsuits brought by thousands of people who say they were injured by the devices. Under the terms of the settlement, Philips did not admit fault or liability.
- Citing our reporting, Sens. Dick Durbin and Richard Blumenthal asked the Government Accountability Office in December to investigate the FDA's oversight of medical device recalls. In January, the GAO said it would launch an inquiry for the first time in years. The ProPublica and Post-Gazette investigation showed that the FDA, responsible for protecting the public, received hundreds of complaints about the machines in the years before the recall but did not issue any safety alerts.



The C Block of the Idaho Maximum Security Institution, where civil commitment patients are held, near Boise. Patient documents blurred by ProPublica. Sarah A. Miller for ProPublica.

# **FDA Moves to Scrutinize Specialized Health Screenings**

The Food and Drug Administration issued a rule in April that brings new scrutiny to a range of critical lab-developed tests, marking a massive shift in the agency's approach to a sector that touches millions. The new rule cites coverage of the issues by multiple media outlets and researchers, including ProPublica articles: One story revealed problems with prenatal genetic screenings, popularly known as NIPTs or NIPS, and the other reported on faulty lab-testing for COVID-19 that was overseen by one company. The ProPublica investigation on prenatal genetic screenings referenced by the FDA revealed how certain tests fall into a regulatory void, with no federal agency checking their accuracy before they reach patients or evaluating marketing claims made by the companies that sell them.

# Idaho Approves Secure Mental Health Facility

On the heels of ProPublica's reporting that revealed how Idaho has detained psychiatric patients in maximum security prison cells since the 1950s, Gov. Brad Little signed into law a bipartisan bill allocating \$25 million to build a dedicated mental health facility. Our December investigation found that Idaho would soon be the only state still using prisons to house patients who face no criminal charges. Idaho state lawmakers and officials ignored repeated warnings for decades that locking away patients without a conviction could violate their civil rights. The state's corrections director, Josh Tewalt, said ProPublica's reporting seemed to create among policymakers "almost a sense of urgency to understand this issue better, to figure out how they could try to be helpful in solving."



Betty VanPatten holds a photo of herself and her husband, Forrest, outside of her home in Sparta, Michigan. Forrest VanPatten died in 2020 after his insurer refused to pay for a potentially lifesaving treatment. Kristen Norman for ProPublica

# **Bill Introduced in Michigan Requiring Insurers to Cover Cancer Treatments**

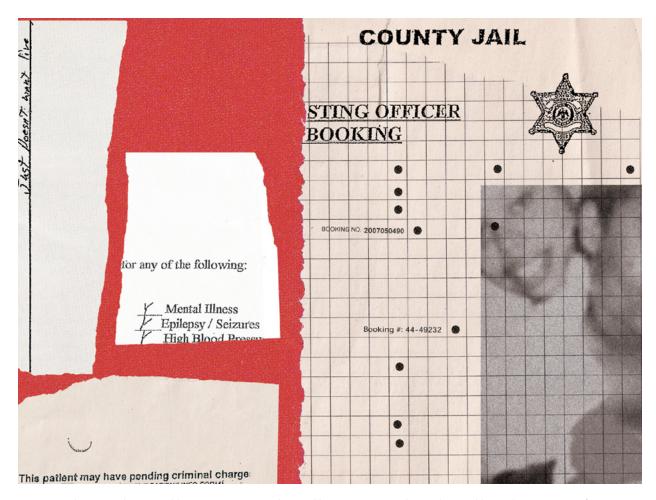
In a victory for cancer patients in Michigan, a state lawmaker <u>introduced a bill</u> in March that would require health plans in the state to cover cutting-edge cancer treatments, including genetic therapies and immunotherapies. The bill was spurred by our November investigation into a 50-year-old Michigan resident who died from lymphoma after his <u>insurance company refused to cover</u> the CAR-T cell therapy treatment prescribed by his oncologist. Weeks after our reporting, the state's top insurance regulator <u>told health insurers</u> they had to cover clinically proven cancer treatments, including genetic and biologic therapies. This new bill aims to codify that guidance.

#### Officials Push to Address Veterans Mental Health Care Concerns

In January, a ProPublica <u>investigation</u> revealed serious lapses in the psychiatric care two veterans received at a

Department of Veterans Affairs clinic in Chico, California, both of whom shot and killed their mothers during mental health crises in January 2022. A ProPublica analysis of over 300 reports published by the VA's inspector general since 2020 point to systemic shortfalls across the department's sprawling health care network, including inadequate mental health staffing, outdated policies and the inability to enforce high standards across a large, decentralized health care network.

Later that month, the nation's top VA official, Secretary Denis McDonough, visited the California clinic and personally <u>pledged to address concerns</u> about inadequate staffing in the facility's mental health unit. In April, citing ProPublica's reporting, the chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Jon Tester, <u>sent a letter to McDonough</u> raising concerns about mental health staffing shortages nationwide and asking him to increase the number of mental health providers in rural parts of the country.



Vanessa Saba, special to ProPublica. Source images obtained by Mississippi Today and ProPublica. Photo courtesy of Angela Anderson.

#### Mississippi Could Limit Jail Time for People Awaiting Psychiatric Treatment

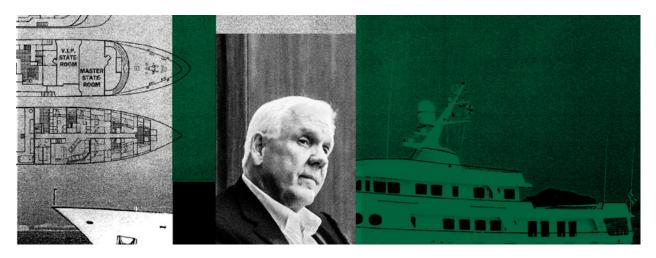
Citing our reporting with Local Reporting Network partner Mississippi Today, lawmakers in Mississippi have overhauled the state's civil commitment laws to limit when people can be jailed without criminal charges as they await court-ordered psychiatric treatment. The new law, which was signed by the governor in May, will go into effect this summer. Our 2023 investigation found that Mississippi is an outlier in how it routinely jails people awaiting mental health treatment for days or even weeks despite not having been charged with a crime.

#### READER FEEDBACK

"I can imagine the time and effort — not to mention the risk — you take in providing us with truth and facts that we might not otherwise have. Thank you for what you do."

—Deb in Arizona

## **Business and Labor**



Alex Bandoni/ProPublica. Source images: Chris Goodney/Bloomberg/Getty Images and M.Y. Michaela Rose brochure provided by law firm Locke Lord.

## Senate Pressures Harlan Crow About Yacht Tax Break

A key congressional committee is <u>pressuring billionaire</u> Harlan Crow for answers after investigators turned up additional evidence that he misrepresented his yacht as a business to score a tax break. ProPublica <u>reported</u> last July that Crow had taken millions in questionable tax deductions related to his yacht. Crow's office responded in a statement that said: "Mr. Crow engages professional accounting firms to prepare his tax returns and complies with tax law in good faith. Any suggestion to the contrary is baseless and defamatory."

The inquiry is part of the ongoing congressional investigations of Justice Clarence Thomas' gifts from billionaires, which was prompted by our 2023 bombshell reporting into undisclosed gifts to Supreme Court justices from wealthy political donors. In response to our initial report, Thomas acknowledged the trips and defended his failure to disclose them, citing guidance from colleagues and others in the judiciary. Crow issued statements about his relationship with Thomas, which we've included in our stories. He acknowledged that he'd extended "hospitality" to Thomas and his wife, but he said Thomas never asked for any of it and it was "no different from the hospitality we have extended to our many other dear friends."

## Chime to Pay \$2.5 Million Penalty Over Poor Customer Service

Nearly three years after <u>ProPublica revealed</u> that the popular banking app Chime had racked up an unusually large number of consumer complaints about locked accounts, inaccessible funds and slow resolution time, the company was found to have violated consumer protections provided by the California Consumer Financial Protection Law. Chime agreed to <u>pay a \$2.5 million penalty</u> and take steps to enhance its customer service.

## Arise Virtual Solutions to Pay \$2 Million Settlement to Workers

In March, we reported that Arise Virtual Solutions, a work-at-home customer service company, will pay \$2 million to workers in the District of Columbia to settle a lawsuit alleging the company failed to pay minimum wage and overtime. The company will pay an additional \$940,000 to the District of Columbia in civil penalties and stop operating there. The lawsuit by the D.C. attorney general was sparked by a 2020 ProPublica investigation into the secretive world of work-at-home customer service that proliferated during the pandemic. Our reporting showed how Arise helped major corporations, like Comcast and Disney, to shed labor

costs by outsourcing customer service to a vast network of agents that work as independent contractors, stripped of the right to minimum wage, overtime and other legal protections provided to employees.

## FTC Orders Intuit to Cease "Deceptive" Advertising

In January, the Federal Trade Commission ordered Intuit, the Silicon Valley company behind TurboTax, to stop what it called years of widespread deceptive advertising for "free" tax-filing software. The order was accompanied by a 93-page opinion that harshly criticized the company. In a statement, Intuit said it planned to appeal the order in federal court. "There is no monetary penalty in the FTC's order, and Intuit expects no significant impact to its business," the statement said, adding that the company "has always been clear, fair, and transparent with its customers."

The order caps off a process that started four years ago when the FTC <u>launched an investigation</u> in response to a series of ProPublica stories documenting Intuit's ad tactics. Our reporting revealed how millions of Americans were systematically <u>tricked into paid tax preparation products</u> even though they were eligible to file for free through a government-sponsored program. Over the years, our reporting also led to <u>an investigation by state attorneys general</u> that resulted in a <u>\$141 million settlement</u> with Intuit and the development of an <u>experimental online tool</u> that would allow Americans to file taxes directly with the IRS for free.

# NY Legislators Move to Address Wage Theft

New York lawmakers proposed three new bills in January to combat wage theft violations in response to reporting by ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Documented that revealed rampant wage theft in New York and the state's failure to protect workers. By analyzing data obtained from the U.S. and New York Labor Department, we found that more than 127,000 New Yorkers had been victims of wage theft during a recent five-year period, and that the New York State Labor Department was unable to recover \$79 million in back wages owed to the workers. "We did not have the data to understand the scale of the issue in New York State until the ProPublica and Documented series came out last year," state Sen. Jessica Ramos said.



Illustration from the 2020 ProPublica investigation into Arise Virtual Solutions by Emily Suvanvej for ProPublica

#### READER FEEDBACK

"ProPublica does classic investigative reporting that requires a lot of shoe leather and poring through complicated and often boring material. Reporting that takes years and is serious, committed and thorough. The payoff is always huge — stories that catch everyone's attention and deliver the goods every damn time. If that's not worth paying for, I don't know what is."

—Carroll in Ontario

## **Children and Families**



In 2023, ProPublica reported on Ty Larson, left, and his sister, Brynlee Larson, who barricaded themselves in a bedroom, defying a court order to be returned to the custody of their father, who they say sexually abused them. Kim Raff for ProPublica

# New Utah Law Prioritizes Child Safety in Custody Courts

Following ProPublica's reporting on <u>Utah courts'</u> handling of custody cases involving allegations of violence, in March, Gov. Spencer Cox <u>signed into law</u> a new bill that aims to prioritize child safety in custody courts. The new law codifies parts of the federal Violence Against Women Act and mandates, among other things, that judges deciding custody first consider risks to the child's safety. Our reporting revealed instances where judges ordered children to participate in so-called reunification therapy with fathers who had been accused of abusing them. The new law will limit the use of reunification therapies and increase scrutiny of expert witnesses.

#### **READER FEEDBACK**

"Your reporting continues to shine a light on topics the American public must understand if we hope to hold on to our democracy. Thank you for your unflinching approach to journalism."

—Mary in New York



Top left: While working as a youth treatment specialist at Pierceton Woods Academy in Indiana, Alexandra Chambers pushed to make sure an abuse allegation was reported to the Department of Child Services. Shelby Tauber for ProPublica

Middle: The DCS continued sending boys to Pierceton Woods even after hearing reports of abuse there. Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar

Bottom Right: Tim Smith is CEO of Lasting Change, the company that manages Pierceton Woods. Lasting Change denied covering up any abuse. Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar

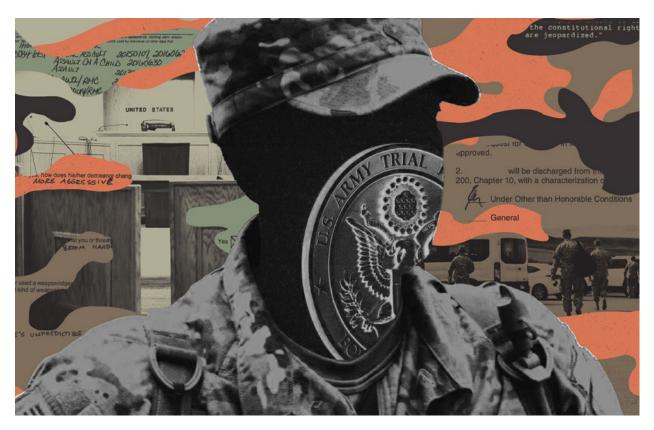


## Indiana Law to Curb Abuse at Youth Treatment Centers

In response to a <u>ProPublica-IndyStar investigation</u> that uncovered more than two dozen allegations of sexual abuse or inappropriate behavior by employees at Pierceton Woods Academy, an Indiana residential treatment center for boys, Gov. Eric Holcomb <u>signed into law</u> legislation intended to increase oversight and curb abuse. Our investigation published in November found that the Indiana Department of Child Services failed to investigate some of the abuse allegations at the academy, and that the staff and managers at the center repeatedly ignored signs of abuse. A Pierceton Woods spokesperson responded to the law's passage saying, "The reason we supported this bill from the beginning is that we serve, support, and treat all our residents with unconditional respect, and always have."



## **Criminal Justice**



Collage by Joan Wong for ProPublica and The Texas Tribune

# Soldiers Charged With Violent Crimes Will Now Face More Scrutiny Before Leaving Service

As of April, the U.S. Army will no longer allow military commanders to decide on their own whether soldiers accused of certain serious crimes can leave the service rather than go on trial. The decision comes one year after ProPublica, The Texas Tribune and Military Times published an investigation that revealed how hundreds of soldiers charged with violent crimes were administratively discharged instead of facing a court-martial. We found that more than half of the 900 soldiers who were allowed to leave the Army in the previous decade rather than go to trial had been accused of violent crimes, including sexual assault

and domestic violence. Choosing to handle such cases administratively instead of through the courts has allowed soldiers to escape potential legal consequences: Those who may have been convicted of sexual assault won't have to register as sex offenders, and those who could have been found guilty of domestic abuse will not be subject to federal restrictions prohibiting them from owning firearms. Under the new rule, military commanders will no longer have the sole authority to grant a soldier's request for what is known as a discharge in lieu of court-martial, or Chapter 10, in certain cases. Instead, the newly created Office of Special Trial Counsel, a group of military attorneys who specialize in handling cases involving violent crimes, must also approve the decision.



Gilbert Poole in his home in Holt, Michigan. "I was in there longer than I was out here. A couple years of adulthood and then the rest in prison," said Poole, who spent nearly 32 years wrongfully imprisoned. "When I came out, I had to learn everything." Sarahbeth Maney/ProPublica

# Michigan Bill Tries to Fix Compensation to Wrongfully Accused

In March, Michigan legislators introduced a bill that would substantially reform the Wrongful Imprisonment Compensation Act, following a ProPublica investigation published in January. The act established a fund seven years ago to help wrongfully convicted people rebuild their lives, but our reporting found that narrow criteria and confusion over eligibility requirements have resulted in delays in compensation, partial settlements or even complete denials.

# **DOJ Reverses Position on Baltimore Man's Conviction**

In February, we wrote about <u>contradictory prosecutions</u>, cases where prosecutors offer one version of the truth while trying one person, then offer a very different version while trying another person. We reported that the U.S. Department of Justice presented conflicting theories: The DOJ first prosecuted a Baltimore man, who pleaded guilty in 2015 to being a felon in possession of a firearm. Then the DOJ prosecuted the police detective who had arrested the man, accusing the detective of planting the gun and framing him. Our reporter found examples of at least 29 men who have been sentenced to death since the 1970s in cases where prosecutors were accused of presenting competing versions of the truth. Two days

after we published our story, the DOJ reversed its previous position and conceded that the Baltimore man's conviction should be thrown out. The DOJ defended its earlier use of opposing theories as "based on the government's reasonable belief in the evidence" but stated that "public confidence cannot sustain irreconcilable versions of one event."

#### READER FEEDBACK

"Now more than ever, our country needs independent journalists, who are willing to investigate and report on sacred cows, uncover hidden malfeasance and promote the common good in our democracy. ProPublica is one fine example."

-Ralph in Iowa

## Government



Abarrotes Yuremi, a small grocery store in Waunakee, Wisconsin, is frequented by Nicaraguan dairy workers and other immigrants. Sebastián Hidalgo for ProPublica

#### DOJ and Wisconsin Sheriff Work to Improve Communication With Non-English Speakers

A 2023 ProPublica investigation in Wisconsin's Dane County revealed how a grammatical mistake in Spanish led sheriff's deputies to wrongly blame a Nicaraguan dairy worker for his son's death. We reported in March that the Department of Justice is now working with the local sheriff's office on its first-ever written policy on how to respond to incidents involving people with limited English proficiency. This follows other reforms, including an \$8 million fund for farmworker housing, and other measures to improve access to government services for people who don't speak English.

#### **New Mexico FEMA Director Steps Down**

The director of a Federal Emergency Management Agency office overseeing a nearly \$4 billion compensation fund for victims of a New Mexico wildfire that was accidentally triggered by the U.S. Forest Service has stepped down. Her reassignment followed months of reporting by ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Source New Mexico detailing FEMA's problems in providing temporary housing and in paying victims for damages. Our investigation found that more than a year after the fire had ripped through the mountains of northern New Mexico and destroyed at least 430 homes, FEMA's claims office had paid less than 1% from a compensation fund. Though the pace has increased — as of early April, the office had paid about 12% — FEMA faces lawsuits accusing it of missing legally required deadlines to make payment offers. FEMA said that it discovered a flaw in its reporting system that allowed some cases to languish, and that it was addressing the issue.

## Housing



A HomeVestors billboard in Boston. Peter DiCampo/ProPublica

#### Lawmakers Work to Reform Contractfor-Deed Home Sales

New legislation has been introduced by both federal and Minnesota state lawmakers to provide additional protections for home buyers and prevent exploitative behavior by sellers in response to a 2022 investigation by ProPublica and Sahan Journal that revealed questionable real estate transactions that left members of Minnesota's Somali and Hispanic immigrant communities at risk of losing their homes. Our report revealed how contracts for deed — an alternative home sale agreement made directly between a seller and a buyer — can lock purchasers into inflated prices and unfavorable terms, and sometimes lead to eviction and the loss of their life savings. The state attorney general's office is also investigating whether sellers broke the law by targeting minority buyers or using deceptive tactics.

#### "We Buy Ugly Houses" Company Overhauls Its Policies

In January, HomeVestors of America, the self-described largest home buyer in the country, announced that it would overhaul some business practices in the wake of a ProPublica investigation that revealed predatory tactics toward homeowners in vulnerable situations. The reforms include establishing a three-day window for home sellers to terminate a sales contract, creating an ethics hotline and using a team of auditors to better police franchise activities. Our 2023 investigation found that the company trains its nearly 1,150 franchisees to zero in on homeowners' desperation, including targeting elderly homeowners who did not understand the contracts they signed. Following our reporting, Congress and federal regulators called for more scrutiny of the company and other house-flipping franchises; and the president and CEO of HomeVestors of America stepped down.

## **Environment**



Oil infrastructure in the Kern River oil field near Bakersfield, California. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

# **EPA Finalizes New Standards for Cancer-Causing Chemicals**

"Sacrifice Zones," our 2021 investigative series that mapped toxic air pollutants across the country, continues to spur impact. The series revealed that residents across the country, notably in areas populated by people of color, are being exposed to toxic industrial emissions linked to increased cancer risk. In March, the EPA issued a rule to slash toxic emissions from commercial sterilization facilities that release fumes of ethylene oxide, labeled by the agency as "one of the most potent cancer-causing chemicals." The new rule will eventually eliminate about 80% of annual emissions of the gas nationwide, according to the EPA.

# **Chevron Will Pay Record Fines for Oil Spills in California**

More than three years after an investigation by Pro-Publica and Local Reporting Network partner The Desert Sun found that oil companies were profiting from illegal spills in California and the state's oversight of the industry was lax, Chevron has agreed to pay a record-setting \$13 million to two California agencies for past oil spills. Our reporting found that state regulators have allowed companies like Chevron to make millions from inland oil spills that can endanger workers and harm the environment. At least one of Chevron's spills in the state is still running 21 years after it began. Chevron did not admit liability in the lawsuit. In an email, Chevron North America spokesperson Sean Comey said the settlements "demonstrate our continuing commitment to take action to address issues and prevent similar incidents in the future."





## Oregon Timber Industry Continues to Benefit From Tax Cuts

Repeatedly citing our coverage as essential reading for lawmakers, Oregon state Sen. Jeff Golden introduced legislation to address some of the key issues raised by "The Cutting," an award-winning 2020 investigative series by ProPublica, Local Reporting Network partner Oregon Public Broadcasting and The Oregonian/OregonLive. The bill, which was weakened and died in committee, would have raised taxes that were slashed for timber companies in the 1990s and restored some of the money lost for public services in communities where timber is harvested. It also would have eliminated a public agency that the news organizations revealed to be a de facto lobbying arm of the timber industry. Our previous reporting revealed that timber companies, increasingly dominated by Wall Street real estate trusts and investment funds, are reaping the benefits of timber tax cuts that have cost Oregon counties at least \$3 billion in the past three decades.



Top left: Machinery logs forestland owned by Weyerhaeuser outside Falls City, Oregon. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Top right: A tree sapling grows in an industrial forest in Oregon's Coast Range. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Bottom right: Falls City is the gateway to the Valley of the Giants, a federal forest preserve with trees draped in neon moss. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

## **Racial Justice**

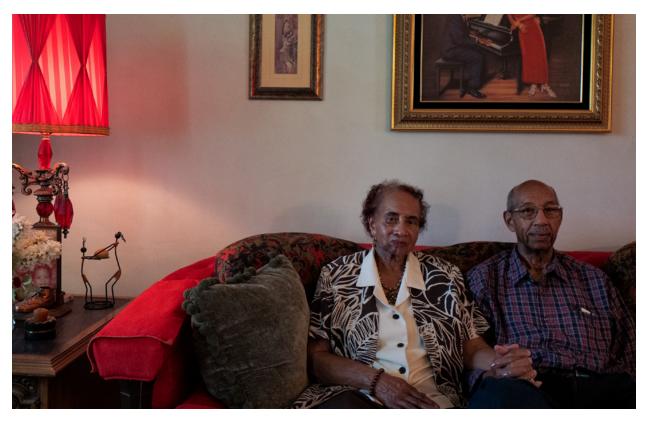


Wendell Yellow Bull at the Wounded Knee site. Photo Illustration by Alex Bandoni/ProPublica. Source Images: Dawn E. LeBeau for ProPublica, 1895 American Museum of Natural History report, American Museum of Natural History 1993 letter to Fire Thunder, 1891 Omaha World-Herald article and the Catalogue of Archaeological and Ethnological Collections in the American Museum of Natural History.

# **New Federal Rules Speed the Repatriation of Native Remains**

"The Repatriation Project," a 2023 investigative series into the failures of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, revealed that remains of more than 110,000 Native Americans are still being held by prominent institutions across the U.S. The series included a dozen stories and an interactive database that allows the public to see the status of repatriation in their communities and has led to widespread impact and acknowledgment of past failures. In part because of our work and after decades of Indigenous activism, American museums and universities in 2023 repatriated more ancestral remains and sacred

objects to tribal nations than during any year in the three decades since NAGPRA's passage, transferring ownership of an estimated 18,800 Native American ancestors. In addition, new federal rules aimed at speeding repatriations went into effect in 2024, after which some of the nation's largest and most prominent museums, including the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Field Museum in Chicago, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, announced that they will close exhibits or remove sensitive Native American items from display as they assess their compliance with the law. In February, U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii urged museums and universities to move more swiftly in a speech from the Senate floor.



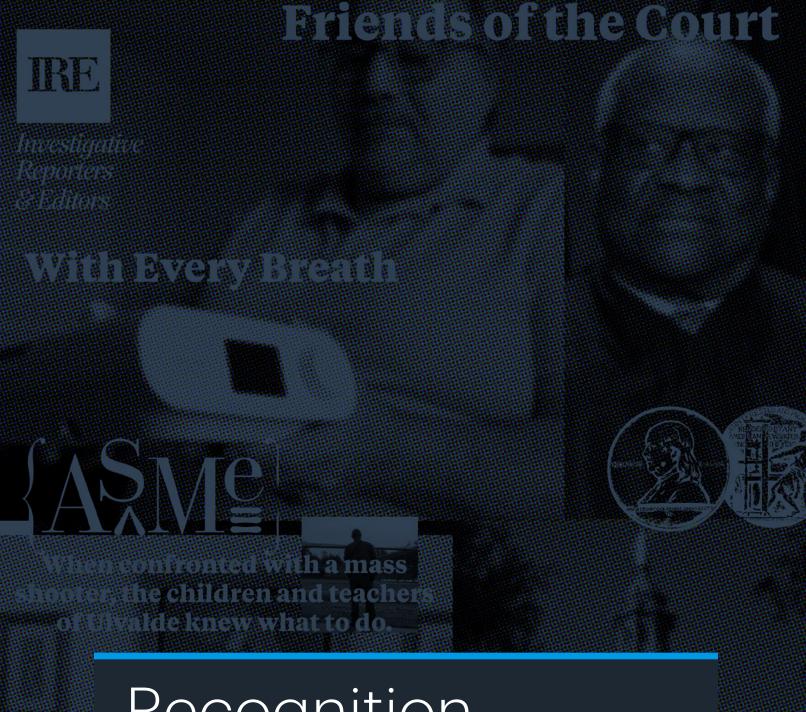
Barbara and James Johnson sit in their living room in Newport News, Virginia, in July 2023. They built the home on family property almost 60 years ago. Christopher Tyree/VCIJ at WHRO

# Federal Legislation Introduced to Assist Heirs' Property Owners

In April, federal lawmakers introduced legislation that would expand heirs' property owners' access to disaster relief and provide assistance in clearing titles. Heirs' property refers to land that has been passed down informally within families; without clear titles, owners can be ineligible for government aid and their land vulnerable to forced sales. Rep. Lizzie Fletcher, a Democrat from Texas, decided to introduce legislation after reading a collaboration between ProPublica and The New Yorker on the legal and financial risks of holding land as heirs' property. More than a third of Blackowned land in the South is heirs' property. The practice of conveying land without a will dates to Reconstruction, when many Black families did not have access to courts, and it continued through the Jim Crow era. Our reporting examined how heirs' property owners can be locked out of federal assistance and compelled by courts to sell their land against their will.

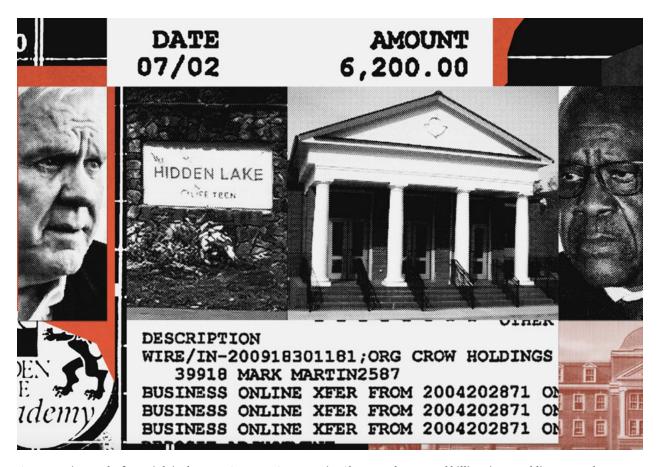
# Virginia Examines Universities' Displacement of Black Communities

In March, the Virginia legislature approved a state-wide commission to investigate the role of public colleges and universities in displacing Black communities. The action is in response to a 2023 series by ProPublica and Local Reporting Network partner Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism at WHRO, which focused on how universities nationwide have uprooted tens of thousands of families of color, contributing to Black land loss and lagging rates of Black home ownership. The series, which detailed how the creation and expansion of Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia, swallowed up a Black neighborhood, spurred city and university leaders there to create a similar task force in January.



# Recognition for Our Work

Some of our best work from last year has been honored in recent months, including the Pulitzer Prize for public service, a National Magazine Award and three George Polk Awards. A full list of awards that ProPublica and partners won is on our website. Here are some of the highlights from this spring.



Our reporting on the financial ties between Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and billionaire Republican megadonor Harlan Crow ignited a national debate about the ethics of the court. Collage by Lisa Larson-Walker/ProPublica

#### Pulitzer Prize — Public Service

"Friends of the Court"

#### **Pulitzer Prize Finalist — Explanatory Reporting**

"Someone Tell Me What to Do" (with The Texas Tribune and FRONTLINE)

#### National Magazine Award — Reporting

"Someone Tell Me What to Do" (with The Texas Tribune, in partnership with FRONTLINE)

#### **George Polk Award — Multiple Categories**

"Friends of the Court" won in the the national reporting category

"With Every Breath" (with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette) won in the medical reporting category "The Kids of Rutherford County" (with WPLN Nashville Public Radio and Serial Productions, The New York Times) won in the podcast reporting category

#### **Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting**

"Friends of the Court"

#### **Collier Prize for State Government Accountability**

"Someone Tell Me What to Do" (with The Texas Tribune and FRONTLINE)

#### IRE Award — Print/Online

"Friends of the Court"

#### RTDNA Foundation — First Amendment Award

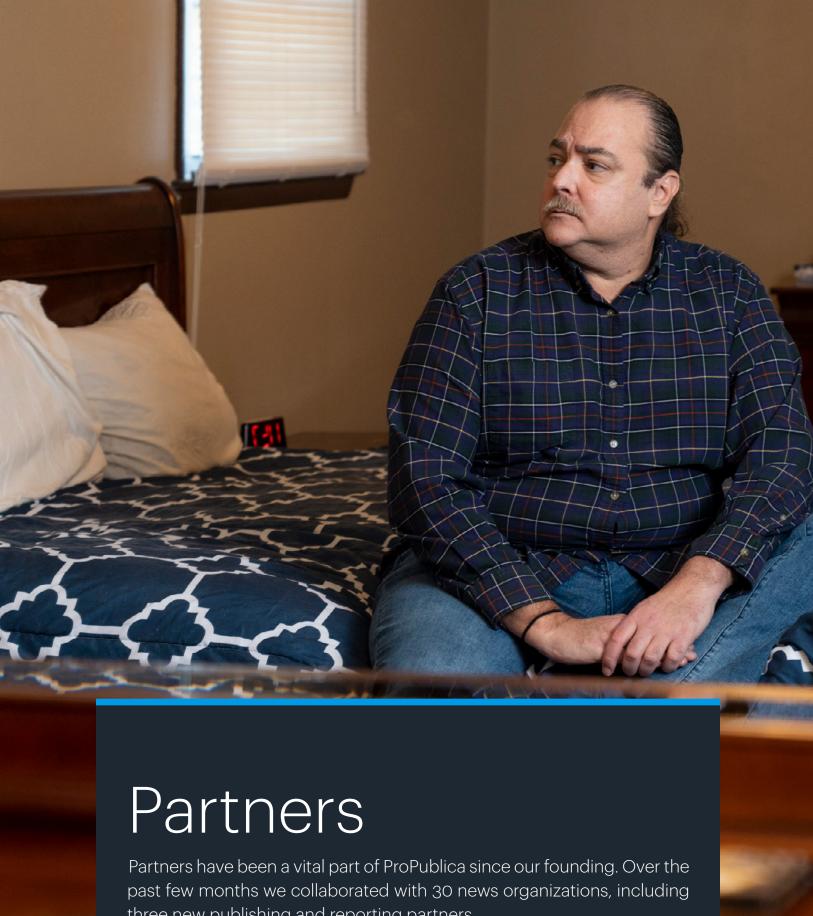
"Friends of the Court"

## Columbia Journalism School — Paul Tobenkin Memorial Award

"Uprooted"

#### Philip Merrill College of Journalism — Maria Ressa Prize for Courage in Investigative Journalism

"Friends of the Court"



three new publishing and reporting partners.

Richard Callender, who underwent a double lung transplant in 2015 and a kidney transplant in 2021, waited months for a replacement CPAP machine after Philips Respironics launched a recall. Benjamin B. Braun/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

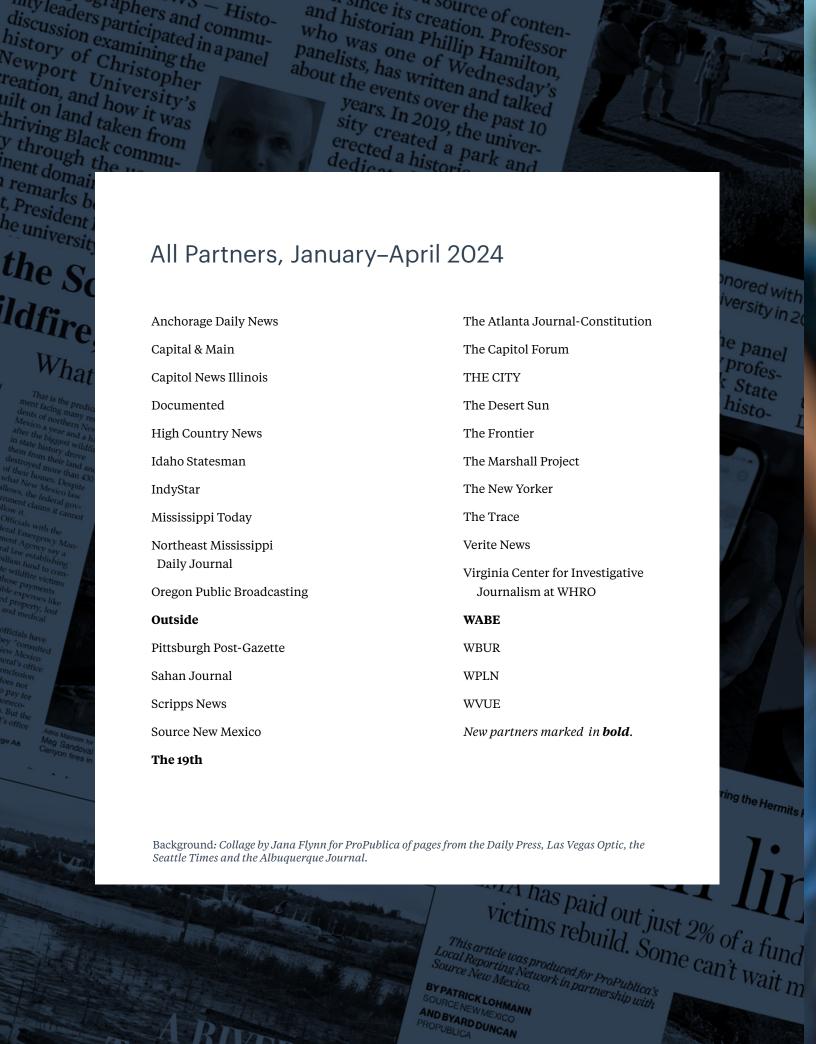


Jules Lee Jr. is one of the millions of people whose lives were impacted by the 2021 recall of Philips breathing machines. He worries about his health, but he can't bring himself to go back on a CPAP. Liz Moughon/ProPublica

### Partner Spotlight

■ In 2023, ProPublica partnered with Scripps News to publish a TV segment on the story of Forrest VanPatten as part of our ongoing insurance series, "Uncovered." VanPatten's insurers repeatedly denied requests to cover the cancer treatment prescribed by his oncologist before VanPatten died. Reporters Maya Miller and Robin Fields shared their reporting with the Scripps News team, who produced a segment that aired nationally on the Scripps News TV channel, as well as on a number of their more than 60 local stations. Key among these was Scripps News Grand Rapids, which broadcasts to Sparta, Michigan, where the VanPatten family lives, and which produced a segment on VanPatten shortly before his death. In January 2024, Michigan's top insurance regulator told health plans that they could not deny coverage for clinically proven cancer treatments, making it clear for the first time that this includes cutting-edge genetic and biologic therapies like those VanPatten was denied. By March, Michigan state Sen. Jeff Irwin introduced a bill requiring health plans to cover a new generation of advanced cancer therapies.

■ An ongoing ProPublica-Pittsburgh Post-Gazette investigation revealed that Philips Respironics whose U.S. headquarters is in the Pittsburgh suburb of Murrysville, Pennsylvania - received thousands of complaints about a dangerous defect in its breathing machines but kept them secret for years as stock prices soared. As a part of the project, our video teams co-produced the 20-minute documentary "The Human Toll of Philips' Massive CPAP Recall: With Every Breath," which provides an intimate glimpse into what happened when users learned that the company's CPAP machines might be causing harm. ProPublica's new dedicated social video team also created a TikTok video responding to readers' questions, as well as Instagram slideshow posts. ProPublica reporter Debbie Cenziper and Post-Gazette reporter and investigations editor Michael Sallah discussed the series and its impact on "PBS NewsHour," while Post-Gazette reporters appeared on local news station KDKA in order to create more awareness about the investigation.





Back page: Marvin Cotton Jr walks toward the house where he grew up in Detroit. Sarahbeth Maney/ProPublica

