



Wisconsin Watch
**Annual
Report**

2020



Photo: The Wisconsin State Capitol is seen via drone on Feb. 1, 2021, with Lake Mendota in the background. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

A note from the founders



The most chaotic year in the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism's history was also its most productive. Collaboration, innovation and the support of donors drove the quality and quantity of our journalism and expanded business operations to meet journalistic and financial challenges.

Forced by the pandemic to abandon our offices at the UW-Madison journalism school in mid-March 2020, the staff worked tirelessly to investigate [disinformation](#), Wisconsin's [failing unemployment system](#), the impact of [crushing medical debt](#), Wisconsin's often-flawed response to the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), and [problems in the state's election system](#). In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, we examined calls for racial justice and how police can [better respond to protests](#) to minimize violence, what ["defunding" the police](#) would look like in Milwaukee, the factors leading to the [deadly protest in Kenosha](#) – and police decision to [work with armed militia members](#).

We launched News414, an innovative free news-by-text service to fill information and accountability gaps in Milwaukee's Black- and brown-majority neighborhoods. And we leveraged our journalistic resources through collaborations with news organizations ranging from [ProPublica](#) to Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, [our partner in News414](#) along with Outlier Media.

Wisconsin Watch, the Center's newsroom, reached an estimated audience of 43.1 million people and issued a record 81 major reports – nearly tripling the number of stories we typically publish.

With your help, the Center raised a record \$1.3 million. The number of people who support the Center grew to 688 individual donors in 2020, a 38% increase. News organizations and foundations also provided robust support of our efforts to provide you with authoritative, fact-checked investigative journalism.

The past year was difficult, frightening and devastating for many in our society. At the Center, the pressures of covering the election, pandemic and racial reckoning pushed us to the very limits of our endurance.

Our staff is committed to anti-racism as we push forward, guided by our long-time values: Protect the vulnerable. Expose wrongdoing. Explore solutions. We now are investigating stories – racial equity, civic and public health and clean water – that will improve and perhaps help save lives in 2021 and beyond. We are grateful for the generosity of hundreds of you who make this work possible!

Andy Hall
Executive director
& co-founder

Dee J. Hall
Managing editor
& co-founder

Photo: Dee J. Hall, left, and Andy Hall are seen at work in Madison in 2018. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

What we do

The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism is an independent, nonpartisan and nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that reports on government accountability and quality of life issues, including criminal and racial justice, education, health, the economy and environment. The Center trains the next generation of journalists and news entrepreneurs through collaborations, internships and fellowships with the University of Wisconsin-Madison and other universities and colleges.

Our mission: To increase the quality, quantity and understanding of investigative journalism to foster an informed citizenry and strengthen democracy.

Our guiding principles since the Center's launch in 2009: Protect the vulnerable. Expose wrongdoing. Explore solutions.

Our journalism is anti-racist, in alignment with a [statement and pledge of action](#) signed in 2020 by every member of the Wisconsin Watch staff, who promise to “investigate and expose the histories and disparate impacts of systems on the lives of people of color.” We also pledge to explore solutions to problems through the lived experiences of people who are finding ways to navigate existing institutions.

Photo: Bram Sable-Smith, WPR Mike Simonson Memorial Investigative Reporting Fellow, reports from the COVID unit at the UW Hospital on Nov. 17, 2020. (Angela Major / WPR)

We embrace anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusiveness in our journalism and operations.

We dig into secretive conduct by public officials, exposing abuses of power, documenting broken and failing systems, putting the findings into a national context and exploring solutions. Every investigation is fact-checked to ensure that our reporting is accurate and fair.

We believe in collaborating with, rather than competing against, other news outlets to build a better and more sustainable news ecosystem. You can find our multimedia reports on [WisconsinWatch.org](#) and in hundreds of other news outlets, who receive our stories for free through our own distribution system and a partnership with the Associated Press.

We push the traditional boundaries of investigative reporting in search of better ways of connecting with and serving the public. Through [News414](#), launched with our partners at Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service and Outlier Media, we deliver free information requested via text in English and Spanish to subscribers in underserved neighborhoods to help them navigate food, employment, housing, health and other systems while also informing our deep-dive reporting. We make [audio versions of our Wisconsin Watch reports](#) available on podcasting platforms to further increase the accessibility of our journalism.



Join

The Watchdog Club

The Watchdog Club consists of the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism's most committed members who support the organization's important mission. Wisconsin needs authoritative, nonpartisan investigative reporting and fearless, well-trained investigative journalists to hold the powerful to account and improve the quality of life for residents. The Watchdog Club makes this possible.

Members help the Center remain a sustainable source of investigative journalism and train the next generation of investigative reporters and news professionals. Donors of at least \$1,000 become members of our Watchdog Club and receive: "Behind the Story" insights, private events such as coffee conversations with [world-renowned journalists](#), exclusive offers including personal invitations to our partners' events, regular updates on the state of investigative journalism in Wisconsin and personal messages from Executive Director Andy Hall.

The Leadership Circle

The Leadership Circle within the Watchdog Club is a network of supporters taking a leadership role to build a legacy that will inform residents and strengthen our democracy for decades to come by transforming the Center into a larger, more financially resilient institution.

Donors of at least \$5,000 become members of our Leadership Circle and receive all the benefits of the Watchdog Club, plus, behind-the-scenes insights and invitations to exclusive Leadership Circle events. When the threat of the virus has passed, Leadership Circle members also will receive invitations for a tour of the Center headquarters and lunch with Executive Director Andy Hall and Center staff.



LC Donors

Watchdog Club

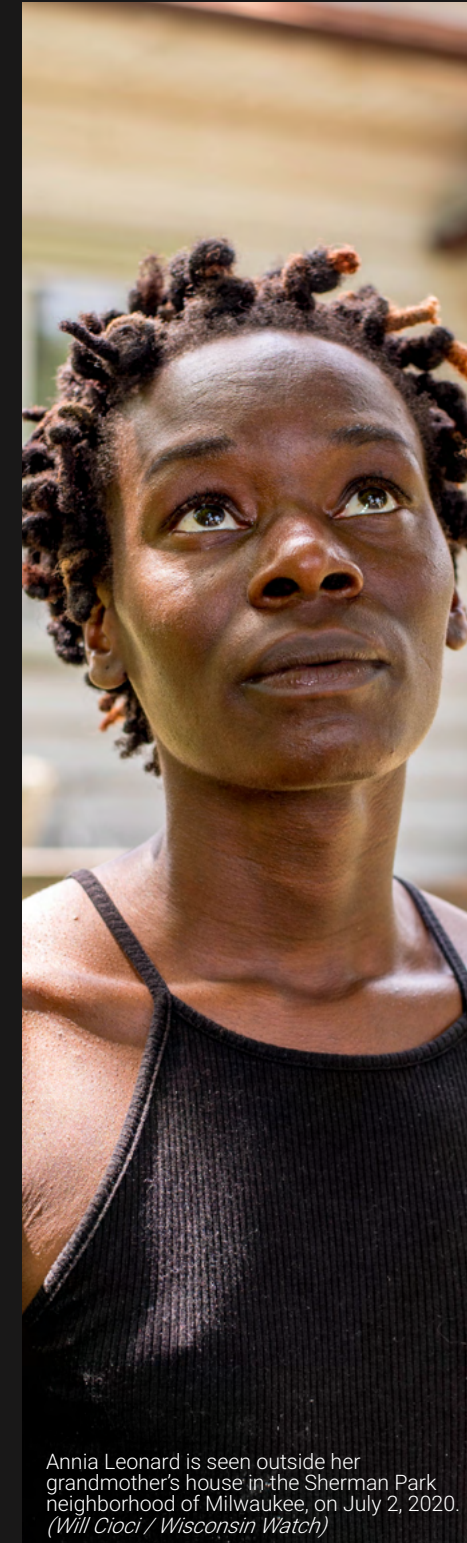
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Visit wisconsinwatch.org/watchdog-club or contact Development Director Jay Burseth at jburseth@wisconsinwatch.org to learn more about joining the Watchdog Club or to give a donation of any amount.

Chronicling a crisis and lifting up lives in 2020



Annia Leonard is seen outside her grandmother's house in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee, on July 2, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



Don Natzke is seen in the backyard of his Shorewood, Wis., home on July 31, 2020. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)



Adija Greer-Smith is seen outside the Sherman Phoenix, which houses her bakery alongside other local businesses, in Milwaukee on July 2, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)

“**Shut the front door!**” Blanche Jordan exclaimed into the phone last April. Bram Sable-Smith, a WPR reporting fellow embedded in the Wisconsin Watch newsroom, had just told her a hospital had dropped the \$7,150 lawsuit filed against her over unpaid medical bills.

The bills stemmed from a hysterectomy related to her cancer treatment in 2016, and she initially assumed the hospital accepted her insurance. Jordan’s suit was among [dozens dismissed](#) after we found that Wisconsin hospitals [had filed more than 100 suits](#) against patients in the first three weeks of the pandemic. The reporting kicked off a larger investigation, [Costly Care](#), of how hospitals aggressively collect debt through courts – often targeting the most financially vulnerable.

“I don’t even know how to feel right now,” Jordan, a Milwaukee assisted living caregiver, said about her suit’s dismissal. “My heart is racing. I’m shaking right now, because these doctors’ bills have literally taken over my whole life.”

That was just one example of Wisconsin Watch’s impact in 2020, a year of overlapping crises. We centered our reporting on people affected by the state’s challenges and sought solutions. Here are other examples.



(Claire DeRosa / Wisconsin Watch)

Outbreak Wisconsin

[This ongoing collaboration with WPR](#) examines the pandemic through the voices of residents living through it. Among the people we have followed: [Amy Moreland](#), a Madison bartender who struggled with the state’s jobless benefits system and has pivoted to a new career; [Mariah Clark](#), who has cared for the sick and dying during the pandemic as a nurse at UW Health; [Adija Greer-Smith](#) of Milwaukee, who has steered her bakery through the pandemic while helping her son reflect on systemic racism; and [Jessica Barrera](#), a single mom in Eau Claire with a rare blood disorder. She struggled to survive on her small federal disability payments after losing her part-time job and being denied unemployment benefits.



Leo Siebold, 2, is seen with his brother Jonah, 5, at their home in Mount Horeb, Wis., on Feb. 14, 2020. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

Flawed Forensics

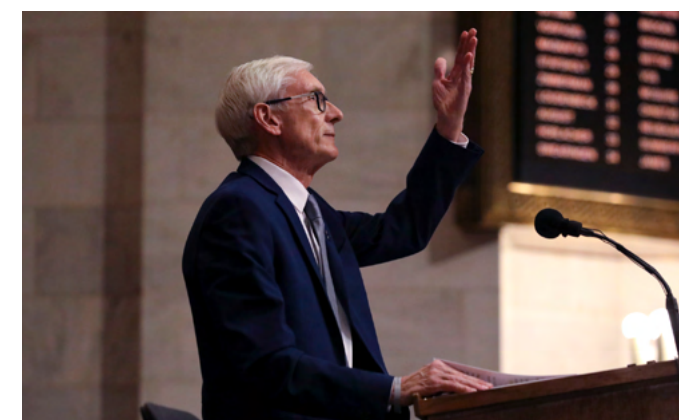
Managing Editor Dee J. Hall revealed that Dr. Barbara Knox, a nationally known figure in the field of child abuse investigations, left her University of Wisconsin-Madison job after colleagues accused her of bullying. Hall documented the story of [Brenna and Joel Siebold of Mount Horeb](#). In 2018, the couple faced an investigation – initiated by Knox’s team – into whether they abused their then-9-month-old son after bringing him to the hospital with a fever. Surgical scars were listed as bruises and false information was inserted into his medical record. Our coverage drew notice in Alaska, where Knox now leads child abuse investigations, and our work on this issue continues.



Amy Moreland is seen on her apartment balcony in Madison on Jan. 29, 2021. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

Lives on Hold

Jessica Barrera’s story [spurred us to investigate](#) how Wisconsin blocks people on federal disability from drawing unemployment benefits – a ban the state initially applied to federal pandemic benefits as well. Our reporting pushed the state to [partially reverse course](#), allowing potentially thousands of additional jobless Wisconsinites to qualify for federal aid. We continue to [investigate additional breaks](#) in Wisconsin’s safety net that left jobless residents struggling to pay for food, rent and other bills.



Governor Tony Evers gives his second State of the State address in Madison at the State Capitol building on Jan. 22, 2020. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

Impact for health care workers

Gov. Tony Evers in March [relaxed a range of rules](#) governing Wisconsin’s health care workforce after we reported on regulations that initially blocked [physician assistants](#) from lending their skills as the pandemic took hold.



Election officials look over ballots as the recounting of presidential ballots in Milwaukee County begins on Nov. 20, 2020 in Milwaukee. (Tom Lynn for Wisconsin Watch)

Narrow Margin

[Narrow Margin](#), a major push to cover Wisconsin’s pivotal role in the 2020 election, focused on issues of voter suppression, disinformation and election security. The resulting project generated roughly 50 major reports, including some reported and written by students in [the investigative reporting class](#). [Dee Hall teaches each spring](#) at UW-Madison.

We covered the state’s “[pandemic election](#),” in April, including [the absentee ballots that never arrived](#), and investigated [issues with the U.S. Postal Service](#) that affected the 2020 election.

We partnered with the UW-Madison Center for Journalism Ethics and reporter Howard Hardee to cover [election disinformation](#) and produce toolkits for reporters and consumers to navigate the information disorder.

In the fall and winter, Votebeat, a pop-up newsroom, [provided funding](#) for two full-time reporters – Nora Eckert and Anya van Wagendonk, and a part-time editor, Sharon McGowan – to boost our [election-related coverage](#), including investigating Wisconsin’s paralyzing partisan divides and efforts to improve ballot access for [people like Rhonda Staats](#), one of about 100,000 Wisconsin voters who are blind or visually impaired.

News414: Collaborating to serve Milwaukee residents in 2020



In collaboration with Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service and Outlier Media, we began delivering rapid information via text to 2,300 Milwaukee residents as the pandemic took hold. That includes how to apply for rent assistance, where to find food distribution centers and how to navigate the state's unemployment system – information residents we surveyed told us they wanted to know.

Texting conversations between reporters and residents are inspiring more traditional stories that seek solutions to problems ranging from [racial disparities in policing](#) to Milwaukee's [housing crisis](#). Those stories are just one piece of a service that includes engagement, listening and trust building – all to serve through journalism that gives back.

Our engagement lays bare the stark challenges Milwaukee residents have faced during the pandemic, particularly in Black- and brown-majority neighborhoods that leaders have neglected for decades. But the texts also offered moments of hope that sustain our work – such as when we helped a father secure free beds for his children.

“**That was an answer from God,**” the man told us.

Another subscriber got \$1,420 in assistance to pay rent after tips he got from News414.

“**Thank you for all the information and supporting the community,**” the person texted.

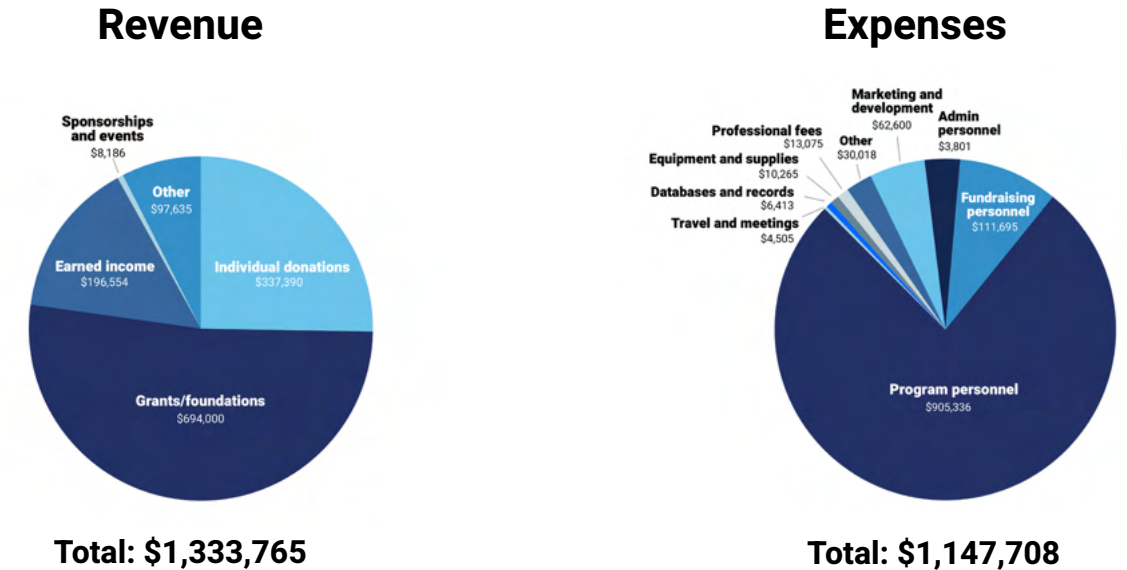
The project has strengthened our relationship with the nonprofit Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, and together, we are dramatically expanding the partnership.

Photo: Wyconda Clayton is seen inside her home in Milwaukee on July 17, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



Financial information

All figures are preliminary and unaudited



Wisconsin Watch has professionalized its business operations and attained strong results, including revenue growth from \$570,000 in 2016, to \$730,000 in 2018, to a total of \$1.3 million in 2020.

Major funders

Thank you to our major funders!

- Reva and David Logan Foundation
- Joyce Foundation
- Facebook/Lenfest Institute
- Craig Newmark Philanthropies
- Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment
- Report for America
- First Draft News
- Greater Milwaukee Foundation
- NewsMatch
- Votebeat
- Evjue Foundation
- ProPublica
- Economic Hardship Reporting Project
- Brico Fund
- Google News Initiative
- Herb Kohl Philanthropies
- Wisconsin Newspaper Association
- Solutions Journalism Network
- UW-Eau Claire Foundation



Photo: Members of the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism staff as they appear on weekly Zoom meetings.



Ramiah Whiteside of Milwaukee holds a sign during a protest outside of the Wisconsin governor's mansion in Maple Bluff, Wis., on Nov. 24, 2020. Whiteside is prison outreach director for Milwaukee-based Ex-incarcerated People Organizing, which is part of Wisdom, a statewide faith-based prison advocacy group. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

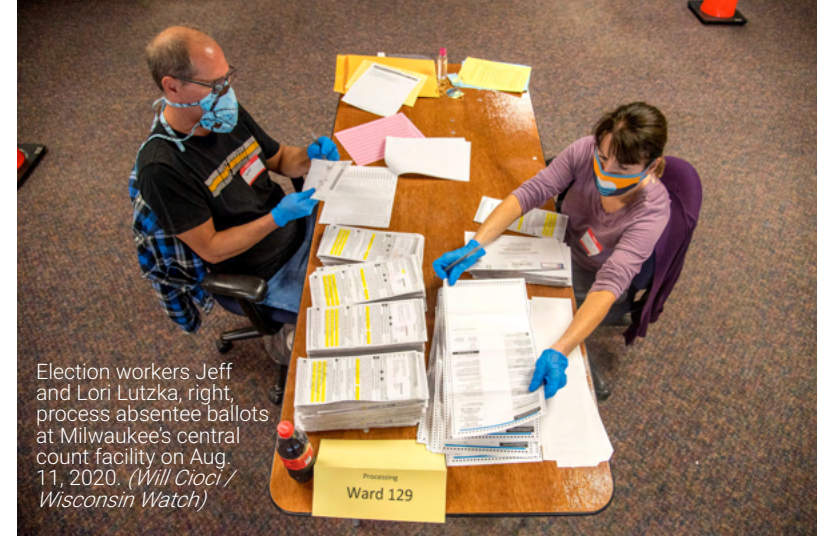


Danielle Mielke, 19 (left), and Amira Caire, 22, work on a mural at the University Bookstore in downtown Madison on June 9, 2020. The mural depicts Tony Robinson, a Black teenager who was shot and killed by a member of the Madison Police Department in 2015. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



Protesters participate in a Juneteenth march organized by the group BLACK WMNZ Emancipation in Milwaukee on June 19, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)

Top photos of 2020



Election workers Jeff and Lori Lutzka, right, process absentee ballots at Milwaukee's central count facility on Aug. 11, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



An estimated 1,500 protesters gather at the Wisconsin State Capitol on April 24, 2020 to demand an end to the shutdown of public spaces and business in Wisconsin aimed at curbing the coronavirus pandemic. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



Madison resident Alfonso Noble participates in a car parade around the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison on Nov. 7, 2020. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)



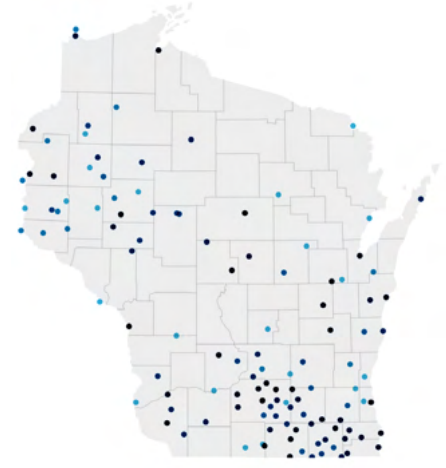
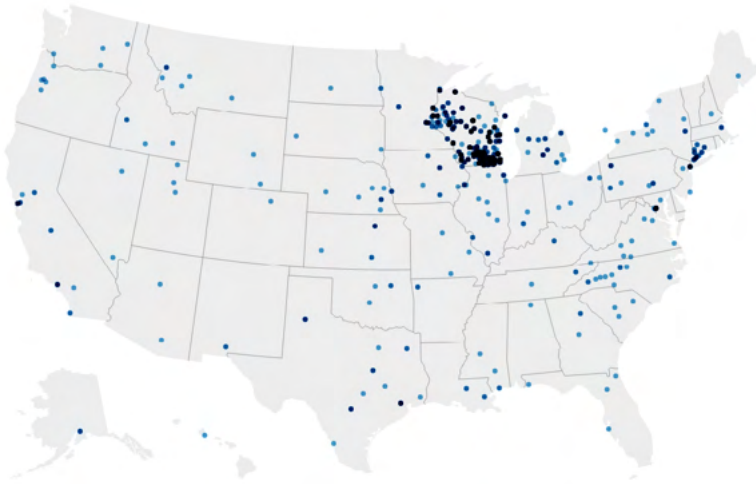
Demonstrators gather outside city government buildings on Martin Luther King Blvd in Madison to protest police misconduct on the night of June 8, 2020. (Will Cioci / Wisconsin Watch)



Christina Brahos, a registered nurse, uses wipes after caring for a patient with COVID-19 on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020, at UW Hospital. (Angela Major / WPR) This photo was made by WPR and used in collaboration with Wisconsin Watch reporting.

Where our stories are used

We are proud of the broad reach of our news coverage, a record that few comparable news organizations can match. Here is how our stories flow through Wisconsin and across the nation.



These maps show the locations of news organizations in Wisconsin and across the United States that published or cited Wisconsin Watch's work from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2020.

**Audience
metrics
for Jan. 1 to Dec.
31, 2020**

43.1 million

total estimated audience

3.8 million in print • 39.3 million online

1,955

pickups, mentions, follow-up
reports, columns/editorials
and localized reports

81

major reports

401

news organizations published,
broadcast or cited our work

152 in Wisconsin

46

states, and Washington
D.C. and 10 other nations

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