

Detroit Free Press

COMMUNITY
**IMPACT
REPORT**
2020





On the cover

Respiratory Therapist Eralda Bendaj, 31, of Wixom talks with a COVID-19 patient as she performs a home oxygen study to check his blood oxygen levels to see if he will need oxygen once he is discharged from Beaumont Hospital in Farmington Hills, Mich. on Dec. 17, 2020. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

FROM THE EDITOR

Unceasing commitment through trying times

Dear readers,

2020. What a year. COVID-19, floods, protests, plots against the governor, the election that never ends, COVID-19 surges again, and finally, a vaccine. For you, and the staff of the Free Press, it has been a year like no other. One can't help but be impressed by the resilience of Detroiters and Michiganders in coping with all that has happened, despite the hardships imposed and the actions of a few bad actors.

This special impact report is designed to share with you some of the best work by our remarkable staff and the impact it has had on Detroit and Michigan this year, during which our staff has been out of our downtown offices since mid-March, working from home because of the pandemic.

Whether it is reporting on the novel coronavirus or the disinformation-filled election season that put Michigan into the national spotlight, we have had one goal in mind: report the truth. That is our goal every day in all we do, but never has it been more important than during the pandemic and the long season of mistruths and falsehoods around the election campaign, vote-counting and the results in Michigan.

We've reported in great depth on the rapid spread of the virus, on steps to slow it down, on the plight of health care workers, and on the grief of families torn apart by the virus.

We covered the candidates, the campaigns and the court cases, and were at the TCF Center as the votes were counted — reporting what really happened, not the fantasies of those alleging fraud. We did dozens of fact checks, again, with that singular devotion to reporting the truth.

Please enjoy reliving some of the important, high-impact work of the Free Press staff. We are grateful for your readership and support, and for your subscriptions (digital and in print). It's been a trying year, to be sure, but it's been a great year for journalism.

Please stay safe. Wear a mask. Socially distance. And get the vaccine when it is your turn.

Peter Bhatia
Editor and Vice President

Free Press a driver of change in Michigan

Anjanette Delgado Detroit Free Press

This report is intended to illuminate the change that happens as a result of our journalism, and it shows that perhaps the most valuable role we served in 2020 was ensuring the truth was told in a year rife with misinformation. From before March, when the world shut down, until now, we've made certain you had the most accurate, useful information about the coronavirus to protect you and your family and save lives. We've pushed state and local health officials for greater transparency so we all could understand the true impact of COVID-19 on Detroit and Michigan. We crossed the COVID-19 line suited up in full personal protective equipment to ask the hard questions, to listen to and record the stories of loss, to photograph illness, death and survival.

This summer we walked, wearing gas masks and protective gear, for miles and weeks alongside racial justice protesters so that we all could bear witness to the reckoning happening in Detroit. Protesters told us they felt safer with the cameras on, and Mayor Mike Duggan and the city specifically cited our video feed.

Continued on next page

LEFT: Jah-T of Detroit pauses at The Fist sculpture with other marchers during a march to listen to speeches on the sixth day of protests against police brutality in Detroit on June 3. The Detroit Police Department launched at least two investigations into police misconduct during this year's protests as a result of inquiries made by the Free Press. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)





This fall, as political disagreements divided neighborhoods and families, our reporters checked the facts and held public officials and others to account when they attempted to spread falsehoods and change the vote.

These stories are enormous — the stories that will be told for generations — but we were also there for smaller moments, for significant opportunities that proved, despite all of the heartache and terribleness of 2020, we will emerge stronger for having each other. And stronger for supporting the brave journalists who have the audacity to, quite simply, tell the truth.

Thank you to our many subscribers and funders. Without all of you, this work wouldn't have been possible. You have a stake in our future and the future of this community, and we want you to know we take your trust in us seriously.

We're planning coverage for the year ahead, most importantly getting to herd immunity amid rampant misinformation about the coronavirus vaccines, watchdogging Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's pandemic orders, tracking the state's economic recovery, reporting on the transition in both government and Detroit Lions leadership, tracing the impact of the social justice movement on policing and fighting for public records through the Freedom of Information Act. We will strive to make 2021 a year that's healthier and more equitable than the one before. And we will continue to fight for a common understanding of the truth, no matter how unsettled this new ground may feel.

Continued on next page

LEFT: Marsha Roderick, left, has her hand held by case manager Cheryl Linari before Dr. Neeli Thati administers a nasal swab to test for the coronavirus May 8 at Salvation Army Harbor Light. We crossed the COVID-19 line suited up in full personal protective equipment to ask the hard questions, to listen to and record the stories of loss, to photograph illness, death and survival. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)

Here are the stories that made a difference in 2020, told by journalists at the Free Press:

Widow meets nurse, learns of husband's final hours

Before the first novel coronavirus cases were diagnosed in the United States, the Detroit Free Press sounded the alarm and began researching the illness in order to inform the public. By tracking the international cases of COVID-19, and ultimately the Stateside cases, the Free Press provided a forecast of what was yet to come in Michigan.

From the very beginning of this health crisis, the Free Press has provided reliable health information to counter a sea of confusion and misinformation. Our in-depth coverage has touched on a broad range of topics, including virus testing, hospital preparedness, racial health disparities, mental health fallout, educational impact, the long-term health effects of COVID-19, vaccine production and distribution, and the rising number of COVID-19 deaths. In a survey of Free Press readers in July, two-thirds of respondents said

they took action to keep themselves and their families safe because of information we reported. Seventy-eight percent agreed the Free Press has helped them understand the coronavirus and COVID-19, while 74% said they learned something new from our coverage of the coronavirus.

But while we have written extensively on complex topics, the Free Press has made a concerted effort to center real people at the heart of our coverage.

Consider the story of Denise Chandler, whose 35-year-old husband, Richard, died of the virus 24 hours after she dropped him off at Sinai-Grace hospital in Detroit. For three months, Chandler wondered what happened to her husband. But then she came

Continued on next page

RIGHT: Denise Chandler, 37, of Detroit lost her husband, Richard Chandler when he died March 29 at Sinai-Grace Hospital in Detroit. She poses with six of her eight children behind the memorial garden she planted in his name. Mackenzie Chandler, 8, left, Kelsey Chandler, 9, Sebastian Ontiveroz, 2, Denise Chandler, 37, (holding) Zoe Ontiveroz, 1, Kodie Chandler, 12, Kaleb Chandler, 10. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)





Denise Chandler, 37, of Detroit lost her husband, Richard Chandler when he died March 29 at Sinai-Grace Hospital in Detroit. Denise Chandler holds personalized photos of her late husband with three of her eight children over the memorial garden that includes her husband's work boots Wednesday, June 24, 2020. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)

across a Free Press story detailing a lawsuit filed by a group of night nurses at Sinai-Grace, which is in a neighborhood that had been brutally attacked by the coronavirus in the spring.

In April, a group of Sinai-Grace nurses

alleged that inadequate staffing levels had reached a crisis point, and they refused to work. Ultimately, they were fired. In the lawsuit that followed, the nurses said that it was impossible to adequately care for COVID-19 patients in March and April because of the conditions at the hospital. Our

sources at Sinai-Grace trusted us with the stories of people who, they say, died needlessly as the hospital ran out of oxygen tanks, ventilators, gurneys, monitors and body bags. The nurses alleged that hospital policy prevented them from performing CPR on patients who had coronavirus or were

suspected of having COVID-19, which they say also led to the unnecessary deaths.

Chandler wondered if that is what happened to Richard.

Continued on next page

“It keeps me up at night to not know ... what happened to my husband,” she said. “We have eight children at home from 18 down to 1 year old. And ... this has just been ... one of the hardest times in all of our lives.”

Chandler reached out to the Free Press for help. And through careful and thoughtful reporting, we were able to connect the grieving widow with the nurse who watched her husband take his final breaths.

Nurse Jeffrey Eichenlaub “saw what she couldn’t see. He heard what she couldn’t hear.” He told Chandler what happened to Richard, even though it hurt.

“Do I feel like your husband’s death was unnecessary? Yes, I do,” Eichenlaub said during a videoconference call. “I feel as if the chain of events that happened could have been different if it was handled better.”

Because of our reporting, his widow got answers to the questions that haunted her for months. Chandler told the Free Press that she never wanted another family to suffer like hers.

“Everyone says, ‘Oh, you’re so strong. Your strength is amazing.’ But I don’t have the option to lose it,” she said. “I have eight kids here that are depending on me to stay strong.”

Single mother finally gets unemployment relief

As Michigan faced an unprecedented unemployment crisis brought on by the pandemic, our “Please answer the phone” coverage revealed that more than 110,000 Michiganders couldn’t collect unemployment due to identity thieves. The unemployment agency was taking in an unprecedented 20,000 calls a day. After our reporter shared her own story, dozens of people reached out to the Free Press with similar stories. Among those was Rebecca Rydzewski of Royal Oak, the single mother of a 12-year-old son who spent five months trying to clear up an identity theft issue so that she could file for unemployment. The same day her story published, Rydzewski got the relief she was looking for: A fraud investigator called her, cleared her fraud issue in 3 minutes and created an unemployment claim for her. Her congressman sent her an email,



Rebecca Rydzewski of Royal Oak poses with her son, Thomas, 12. She’s one of 110,000 Michiganders who have reported identity theft to Michigan’s unemployment agency since the pandemic started.

writing: “We’re responding to a story in the Free Press that was published today regarding identity theft issues and the Michigan Unemployment office. ... I wanted to reach out to you and offer our office’s assistance.” Our reporting made a difference in this

woman’s life, let thousands of others in the same predicament know that they are not alone, and revealed only 15 fraud investigators handle this monumental nightmare for the entire state.

Continued on next page



Delano Sparks is comforted by his sister, Jamie Cook, beside a photo of their mother, Asturd Sparks. Their mother's photo was part of a display on Belle Isle honoring people who died during the pandemic. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Whitmer declares major disaster

Whitmer asked the federal government to issue a major disaster declaration in Michigan with respect to the coronavirus in late March, one day after the Free Press revealed that no such request had been made, despite Whitmer's complaints about a lack

of federal assistance. Just before the Free Press published its story, a spokeswoman for Whitmer said state officials were "reviewing and looking into" a request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Once the Free Press published its story later that day, Brown said officials were "working urgently" on a disaster request, which they filed the next day.

Grieving families find comfort through memorial wall

Our "We Will Remember" obituary series and memorial wall honor the lives and contributions of nearly 300 Michiganders who were not public figures or celebrities, but who were loved and made a difference in this world before dying of complications

from COVID-19.

Many readers have reached out to thank us for providing a small bit of comfort during such a trying time, and MSNBC cited our report on air.

The Free Press is committed to telling the full story of the pandemic, which

Continued on next page

includes the story of what Michigan families lost. Sadly, we know this list is not complete. If you have a Michigan family member who has died and you would like to share their name for this memorial wall, please tell us about them by calling 313-444-2760.

Public officials held accountable for false claims

Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 thanks in large part to 10,704 voters in Michigan. The nation knew the state would play a critical role in determining whether Trump remained in the White House for a second term. The Free Press dedicated significant resources and time to help readers feel comfortable about how to vote, whom to vote for and what might happen after Election Day. (For the first time, any Michigan registered voter could request an absentee ballot for any reason, an appealing but unfamiliar process for many looking for a safe way to perform their civic duty.) We attended rallies, fact-checking the president in real time when he spread misinformation about our state and its industries. And on Election Day, dozens of reporters spread out across



By building trust and expertise on how election operations work, we were able to quickly debunk and clarify allegations that sprouted up after the election. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

the state, monitoring polling places and absentee counting efforts. By building trust and expertise on how election operations work leading up to the vote, we were able to quickly debunk and clarify a litany of allegations that sprouted up after the election. While conspiracy theories remain, our reporting played a key role in holding public officials accountable and providing the context and analysis needed for readers to see the part they play in shaping our democracy.

Nessel opens criminal investigation

Attorney General Dana Nessel announced in September she had opened a criminal investigation into the Unlock Michigan ballot committee and its paid petition circulators after the Free Press reported one of the signature companies had a history of “bait and switch” tactics in which people were given false information about what they were signing and a supervisor for a second company was secretly recorded advising paid signature gatherers on illegal tactics.

Racial justice coverage leads to police investigations

Images of people marching, dancers in the street, tear gas, bloodied faces and flying rocks told the story of summer 2020 in Detroit. Anti-police brutality protesters rallied for more than 100 days in the metro area following the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died after a white officer knelt on his neck for nearly 9 minutes on May 25 in Minneapolis. And the Free Press was there watching, live streaming and asking the tough questions on the handful of days those rallies ended

with police in riot gear — or, in one case, an SUV — physically clashing with the civilians. The Detroit Police Department launched at least two investigations into police misconduct during those protests as a result of inquiries made by the Free Press. In one, in which a photo showed an officer’s arm around the throat of protest leader Nakia-Renne Wallace, police have exonerated the officer. In another, in which a photo appeared to show an officer’s knee on or near a protester’s neck, the department reported it was still investigating in early December 2020. The Free Press continues to investigate the interactions witnessed during the protests, the 33 misconduct cases the Police Department has probed, the three cases deemed misconduct, and the hundreds of arrests made.

Our live video from just the first night of the protests was shared 36,000 times and viewed more than 1 million times. We went on to stream live for weeks, with city officials desperate to keep control saying they watched our feed to help protect the city, protesters rising up against injustice feeling the work of our video journalists

Continued on next page

kept them safe, and viewers anxious to make sense of the rumors tuning in each night and thanking us for bringing them the facts.

MSP database project halted amid concerns

In February, the state halted work on a massive state police database project for the Michigan State Police. Among the concerns cited in a letter from the Attorney General’s Office was the company’s hiring of the MSP captain who was in charge of information technology and retired to become a vice president for the company, as well as the possible hiring of a second former MSP official. Both of those developments were first revealed by the Free Press.

Judicial name game exposed, candidate defeated

We revealed that Wayne County judicial candidate Nicholas Bobak Hathaway legally changed his name a month before launching his campaign so he could run under the name of his wife, Judge Dana Hathaway. (Dana Hathaway and about a half dozen of her relatives have been elected



A Free Press story showed that Wayne County judicial candidate Nicholas Bobak Hathaway legally changed his name a month before launching his campaign, apparently disqualifying himself. (Photo: Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

in recent years, in part because political consultants say the name “Hathaway” is “political gold” in Wayne County.) We also reported that Bobak, as he was then known, sued the county for discriminating against him as a white man. Although he had claimed to have a superlative record as a county employee, court records show he suddenly and inexplicably dropped the case. The Free Press obtained confidential court records that revealed that his supervisor had caught him in a lie, admonished him for habitually ditching work early, and that he had retaliated against an employee who confirmed that he played hooky. A follow-up story showed that Bobak

Hathaway apparently disqualified himself as a candidate by running as Nicholas John Hathaway — ditching his surname for his wife’s — as well as violated legal ethics guidelines, which say judicial candidates should run under their full name to avoid confusing voters. After it appeared Bobak Hathaway won by 600 votes (a margin of .07%), we reported that county canvassers found that some votes had been overlooked, reversing the outcome and handing him a 300-vote defeat (a margin of .04%).

Prosecutor suspended after we exposed his role in a kickback scheme

Macomb County suspended a top assistant prosecutor in September after the Free Press revealed his role in a kickback scheme that could send former Macomb County Prosecutor Eric Smith to prison for obstruction of justice. Paul Bukowski was put on paid administrative leave and will not perform any work for the prosecutor’s office until further notice after the Free Press used public records and sources with knowledge of the federal case against Smith to expose Bukowski as the assistant prosecutor



The loss of his older brother, Glen Bassirpour, inspired Michael Bassirpour to work in mental health and suicide prevention. After the article ran, Bassirpour was offered a presence in a suicide prevention conference.

and part-time political consultant who kicked \$15,000 back to Smith from the \$20,000 Bukowski’s firm was paid during Smith’s 2016 reelection campaign. Smith pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice and is awaiting sentencing.

Crisis prevention, including suicide

In November, we wrote about a scrap metal executive from Bloomfield Hills, Michael Bassirpour of GLR Advanced Recycling, who reached out to Livonia educators to design a mental health outreach program that inspired high

Continued on next page

school students to seek mental health support and disrupted possible suicide attempts. Educators said it was unique and powerful and serves as a model for the future. As a result of the Free Press story, a family in Grosse Pointe reached out to Bassirpour to offer him a presence in a 2021 three-day conference on suicide prevention in an effort to expand the reach of the project and save lives.

Domestic violence victims prevail

In June, we reported that Ford Motor Company had scheduled the debut of the all-new Ford Bronco on the birthday of O.J. Simpson, a man who fled police in a white Bronco after the infamous 1994 murder of his wife and her friend. Ford Motor Company initially said the timing was coincidence. Tanya Brown, the sister of Nicole Simpson Brown, described the devastating impact the news had on a family still grieving the loss of Nicole Brown Simpson. Immediately after that report, the Free Press learned that local UAW leaders representing thousands of factory workers had pleaded with Ford executives to change the date out of respect for domestic

violence survivors in the UAW community. Union leader Todd Dunn said the sensitive issue was a very real trigger for families. Within eight hours of the story spotlighting disapproval and concern among rank-and-file workers, Ford changed the Bronco reveal date from July 9 to July 13. UAW members reached out to the Free Press to express gratitude for coverage they said prevented unwanted attention for a former football star whose trial included horrific evidence of domestic violence and who, since, has since developed a strong following on social media.

Consumer fraud victims get relief

In September 2020, we followed up on our July 2019 “Out of Gear” investigation that exposed defective Ford Focus and Fiesta transmissions — and we highlighted the upcoming class-action settlement deadlines that would impact nearly 2 million consumers. The final chapter in a series of more than a dozen articles explained who had applied and who could apply and spelled out details of the complicated situation. As a result, hundreds of readers called and emailed

to thank the Free Press for alerting them to opportunity they would have otherwise missed. A number of consumers said they applied for relief and received thousands of dollars in payments in time thanks to the Free Press coverage. A few wrote at Thanksgiving saying they gave thanks for our coverage. This coverage has received numerous industry awards:

- National Headliner Award, best business coverage
- Michigan Press Association, best business story
- Michigan Associated Press Media Editors, best business writing
- Michigan Associated Press Media Editors, best public service
- Society for Advanced Business Editing and Writing, honorable mention, investigative reporting
- Society for Advanced Business Editing and Writing, honorable mention, general excellence
- Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism, finalist

From the judges: The judges commend the Detroit Free Press for taking on the powerful auto industry in their hometown. Their investigative



Jean Esposito sold her 2016 Ford Focus back to the company as part of a class action lawsuit. In September, we highlighted the upcoming class-action settlement deadlines. (Photo: John Esposito)

work unveiled not just that Ford Focus and Fiesta cars had faulty transmissions but that the company knew about it.

GM issues recall update after more brake problems

General Motors issued an update to a recall because the initial recall created more problems. After inquiries by the Detroit Free Press, GM confirmed that about 1,600 to 1,700 owners of 2019 Chevrolet and GMC pickups and possibly the Cadillac CT6 have complained of electronic brake failure after they had their dealer perform a

Continued on next page



An aerial photo shows the flooding in downtown Midland on May 20. (Photo: Kelly Jordan and Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press)

GM-issued recall. About 160,000 more GM customers whose vehicles were part of the original recall could be in danger of brake problems, too.

Questions lead to second autopsy review for woman who died in jail

Priscilla Slater died in the Harper Woods jail in June. Slater was arrested after her boyfriend allegedly fired a weapon in the parking lot of a motel

they'd been staying at. Two days later, she was found dead in a cell. Slater's death became a rallying cry for local activists protesting police mistreatment of Black Americans this summer. After the official autopsy, her death was ascribed to a previously undetected heart condition, a conclusion that seemingly absolved Harper Woods of any culpability in her death. We started asking questions about Slater's life and death. We interviewed Slater's sister,

LaTasha Slater, because we wanted to understand who Priscilla Slater was, and what she meant to the people who loved her. We asked another county medical examiner to review the autopsy report, and he came to a different conclusion: Slater, he said, likely died of alcohol withdrawal, something jails are supposed to screen for during intake. Slater's own sister says Priscilla was a heavy drinker; it's an explanation that fits, when nothing else made sense, LaTasha said. Now,

the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office is asking for a third medical examiner to review Slater's autopsy, and will evaluate that report before determining whether there's criminal responsibility for Slater's death.

Truck driver inspires donation to Midland flood victims

In May 2020, we reported on flooding in Midland. Dave Maddox, owner

Continued on next page

of Michigan Valve & Fitting in Chesterfield Township, read quotes from a truck driver who said flood victims didn't have money for face masks and other PPE needed during the pandemic. Maddox drove 90 minutes to donate his supply of 3,500 surgical and N95 masks and 200 face masks to the devastated area. He coordinated with the mayor and the United Way as a result of Free Press news coverage, and he called to thank us. Flood response coordinators were overjoyed.

Family who lost home to fire gets gifts of cash, clothing, new home

As the coronavirus pandemic was just beginning to rage in March, and stay-home orders were coming down from Whitmer, all Christine McCaleb wanted to do was relax in her yard with her family around a bonfire. But the unseasonably warm 60-plus degree weather also brought unusually high winds that whipped the flames into a searing inferno that would destroy the family's home and McCaleb's 2014 Ford F-150 pickup parked in the driveway. While the family of six escaped unharmed, they

lost everything, and during the worst possible time. And, making matters even worse, McCaleb's 1-year-old grandchild has respiratory problems and his breathing machine and air humidifier were both lost in the blaze. After we published a story detailing the family's dilemma, the community rallied around them at a time when they needed it most, flooding the family's GoFundMe page with nearly \$10,000 in donations to help them get medical attention for the 1-year-old and get back on their feet. In addition to monetary gifts, the family received clothing, medical equipment and a new place to call home.

Investigation into Michigan's bridges contributes to policy conversation

A Free Press investigation in early 2020, found Wayne County among other local jurisdictions were struggling to address aging bridges. The story was the third installment in a series that found Michigan's bridges were in bad shape due in part to a lack of revenue and rising costs. As a result of the reporting, the author was asked to speak about her findings

Continued on next page

India Williams kisses her 1-year-old son Kirmel Neal after a house fire destroyed the family home. After a Free Press article published, a GoFundMe page raised nearly \$10,000 to help Williams, Neal, and Williams' mother Christine McCaleb. In addition to monetary gifts, the family received clothing, medical equipment and a new place to call home. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)



at Michigan’s Transportation Asset Management Council Fall virtual conference. She was also invited to speak on Michigan Department of Transportation’s “Talking Michigan Transportation” podcast, where MDOT communications director Jeff Cranson, described the series as “probably the most extensive reporting perhaps ever on Michigan bridge conditions.”

Bertinellis get mother’s painting back

On Oct. 8, a few days after rock legend Eddie Van Halen died, we wrote about Van Halen’s ex-wife, actress Valerie Bertinelli, growing up the daughter of a General Motors executive. The article resonated with Joe Fabrizio of Clarkston, who told the Free Press that Valerie’s mom had given his family one of her paintings when they were neighbors and he wanted her family to have it. We connected him with one of Valerie Bertinelli’s brothers, who was thrilled to receive it. David Bertinelli sent us a



David Bertinelli, left, and Joe Fabrizio with the painting Bertinelli’s mother, Nancy Bertinelli, painted and gave to Fabrizio when they were next-door neighbors in the early 1970s. Fabrizio recently returned the painting to the Bertinellis after reading a story in the Detroit Free Press. (Photo: David Bertinelli)

photo of the two of them with the painting, writing: “What is crazy is she did this in 1973 of the mission in Santa Barbara and 10 years later the mission would be the first thing

I would ever photograph when I started photography school in Santa Barbara.”

After Michigan student gets GI Bill benefits restored, senator pushes for more

U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., is calling for military leaders to show “compassion” in addressing bureaucratic mistakes that have led to the children of long-serving veterans losing out on Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for college and, in some cases, being forced to repay money the government already has paid on their behalf. The letters came in response to a year-long investigation by the Chicago Sun-Times, and co-published by the Detroit Free Press. One student, Paige Dotson, said she had to leave school in the midst of her first year of college after the VA belatedly decided that her father, Russell Dotson, a decorated Navy senior chief boatswain’s mate from Flint, who served 22 years on active duty and in the reserve, had retired 89 days too early to qualify. Following the investigation, the then-acting Navy secretary changed Russ Dotson’s retirement dates, waived

the debt the VA had said his daughter would have to repay and reinstated the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for her and for her brother.


News tips

What should we investigate? Send story ideas and news tips to city@freepress.com or investigations@freepress.com, or call 313-222-6601. The safest way to send secure information is by U.S. Mail. You can reach us at:

Newsroom Tips
 Detroit Free Press
 160 W. Fort St.
 Detroit, MI 48226

Thank you.

Thank you to all of our subscribers. Your support of public service journalism helps make our communities better, more equitable and more democratic. If you haven’t subscribed yet, please consider doing so at freep.com/impact.

Anjanette Delgado is the senior news director for digital at the Detroit Free Press. Twitter: @anjdelgado. 

Shardaya Fuquay, 30, helps her daughter, Khloe, 2, on the slide in their backyard in Highland Park, Mich. on Nov. 18, 2020. Fuquay, who is pregnant, is juggling the demands of being a stay-at-home parent and running a local nonprofit, Journey to Healing, that provides a holistic approach to trauma. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)



A special message to our funders and subscribers

Jewel Gopwani and Anjanette Delgado Detroit Free Press

More than ever, philanthropy played a significant role in funding our journalism in 2020. It's also the year we began selling digital subscriptions. Both efforts are increasingly necessary, as ad sales decline, to sustain the Free Press and our mission to be on guard for all Michiganders. We also partnered with other media, university programs and local community organizations to cover an unprecedented amount of news this year, especially the pandemic, social justice issues and the presidential election.

Report for America

The Detroit Free Press was proud to expand its work with Report for America in 2020. In May, we welcomed two new RFA corps members to cover issues related to economic mobility in metro Detroit and, in partnership with PolitiFact, to robustly fact-check the 2020 elections in Michigan. Our first RFA corps member has been covering the challenges of returning citizens in metro Detroit since spring 2019.

Report for America is an effort by the GroundTruth Project to report

on under-covered issues in local newsrooms across the country. GroundTruth Project pays for a portion of each corps member's salary, the Free Press pays for a portion and then we work to raise money to cover the balance.

Election 2020: We fact-checked claims made in political ads, the statements of elected officials, and after the election, allegations in court documents that sought to overturn election results in Michigan using the vigorous fact-checking protocol of PolitiFact, part of the nonprofit,

Continued on next page

nonpartisan Poynter Institute. We debunked falsehoods about results and procedures, and explained the election process, including what a board of canvassers does and what happens when Michigan's electors meet. These stories were some of our most read and were shared widely, a testament to the crucial need for fact-checking candidates and breaking down the political process.

Economic mobility: As the pandemic financially devastates families and tests Michigan's safety net, a new beat on economic mobility aims to offer useful information to people who may face eviction and food insecurity, and create greater understanding of how the pandemic and its ensuing economic crisis have compounded the obstacles that already existed for many families trying to secure the basics needed to survive and work toward growing incomes and building wealth. We have described the toll the pandemic has had on women in metro Detroit, the challenges homeless shelters face and how people who face eviction can seek out federal and state assistance. These stories have been shared widely among elected officials, nonprofits and other news

organizations, and this work is quickly becoming a touchstone for acute community needs. The Free Press is partnering with nonprofit media organization Bridge Detroit on this beat to reach more Detroiters and learn from the community priorities model that Bridge Detroit is developing as part of its mission to serve Detroiters.

Returning citizens: We continued this beat to shed light on the challenges of people who have been incarcerated, offer useful information that can help people navigate those challenges and track a bevy of policy changes that affect people who have spent time in prison. In 2020, this reporting described how a ticket for a broken taillight can turn into an unending punishment for being poor — when fines pile up leading to license suspensions and jail time. We offered practical information about voting if you've been incarcerated, and raised awareness about the City of Detroit's efforts to help people who may be eligible to have their records cleared under new expungement laws. Hundreds of people reached out to Detroit's Clean Slate program after reading the article. The Free Press also

Continued on next page



Kamal Lukata Anderson of Detroit is one of many people that have had to deal with a suspended driver's license and court costs. He had his license suspended back in 1994 and it took him years to get things back on the right track. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

tracked several policy developments, including a move to end Michigan's ban on food assistance to people who have two or more felony drug convictions. The nonprofit Center for Employment cited our coverage as helping educate policymakers and contributing to a change in policy. This work shows what can happen when a news organization raises awareness about an issue where policy makers can make a difference. The Free Press' reporting on returning citizens is supported by the Hudson-Webber Foundation.

How you can support this work

In 2020, nearly 100 households across metro Detroit contributed to the work of the Free Press' Report for America corps members through one-time and recurring donations. We thank you for supporting journalism. To make a tax-deductible contribution to support this work, go to bit.ly/freepRFA. You also can support local journalism by becoming a subscriber at freep.com/impact.

API funds mis- and disinformation reporting

Thanks to a grant from the American

Press Institute's Trusted Elections Network, the true story of what happened online in Michigan during the 2020 presidential election has been told. Equally important, our readers have learned how this disinformation works and should be better able to recognize it going forward. Disinformation was clearly one of the year's most important stories, and we realize the need for more reporting in this area during the vaccine rollout and in future crisis situations.

- We hired a full-time reporter to cover mis- and disinformation threats to the local vote in Michigan, a critical swing state, for six weeks of the 2020 election season. These stories published in the Detroit Free Press, USA Today, Holland Sentinel, The Arab American News and Michigan Korean Weekly. This work was also cited by BuzzFeed News, PolitiFact, Detroit radio station WJR and the States of America YouTube show with USA Today's Susan Page.

- Over those six weeks we traced the provenance of viral information and showed how it may have been framed one way originally, then quickly distorted and shared to achieve a

desired effect. To be able to see these patterns, we had eyes on 11 different social media platforms and the president's text alerts. The outcomes of this work are:

- We found news tips on smaller social media sites where people were trying to organize among like-minded individuals, enabling us to expose narratives as false before they reached more vulnerable audiences. We became the source for other media and some academics telling Michigan's story. We were able to correct or clarify information on multiple platforms. Our final headline, "Americans decided their own truth this election season," is a warning to all that voters' trust has eroded and change is needed.

SOS Election fellows offered crucial voter info

This year, the Free Press was excited to welcome two fellows through the Election SOS program, which was funded by the American Press Institute and managed by Hearken. In a year when the coronavirus pandemic created health risks for in-person voting, the goal

of the Election SOS fellowship was to help newsrooms across the country respond to critical election information needs. Our fellows offered non-partisan voting information, including what voters needed to know to vote early and at the polls. They explained what election challengers and poll watchers were allowed to do on Election Day and as counting boards processed absentee ballots. After the election, they talked to experts to identify the biggest challenges voters encountered at the polls as well as areas for improvement for no-reason absentee voting in Michigan, and supported the staff with a map showing changing political preferences in local clusters of communities. Their work drew strong readership before and after Nov. 3 and answered crucial election questions during a year of unprecedented voter turnout.

Apprentice program trains next generation of journalists

The Free Press' annual Summer Apprentice Program selects high school students with a demonstrated interest in journalism to join the Free Press newsroom for a summer.

Continued on next page

This year, our newsroom operated remotely, and so the summer apprentice program went virtual. Six students joined our staff, taking part in journalism training, taking on assignments and pursuing their own story ideas. Among their stories in 2020, the apprentices wrote about the expansion of election-year ballot drop boxes in Wayne County, a T-shirt company that pivoted to making medical gowns and how some first-year college students considered taking a gap year instead of starting their college careers in virtual classes. Through this program, apprentices improved their writing and interviewing skills, forged friendships with like-minded young journalists and built a network of professional journalists they can lean on throughout their careers. One apprentice told us that at the Free Press, they weren't treated like high school students, "but actual journalists." Another said the experience "projected me beyond the level of my peers." The 2020 apprentice program was possible thanks to the support of the Lipinski Journalism Fund, endowed by John and Holly Madigan, and The Michigan Daily.

We'd like to thank our generous funders and supporters

- Hudson-Webber Foundation
- PolitiFact
- Bridge Detroit
- American Press Institute
- Hearken
- Facebook
- Lipinski Journalism Fund
- University of Michigan
- Stanford University
- Albion College
- Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund
- Nearly 100 households across metro Detroit
- Thanks to the Free Press' many partners

The Free Press wants to recognize its partnerships with community organizations and other media organizations and groups. We appreciate each of these partnerships. Large and small, they have strengthened our connections with the community, enhanced coverage for Free Press readers and helped the Free Press identify important issues for coverage throughout 2020 and




People outside of the ballot counting area bang on the windows at the TCF Center in Detroit on Wednesday, Nov 4, 2020. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

beyond. These partners include: Michigan Community Resources, Bridge Michigan, Bridge Detroit, the Michigan History Center, Outlier Media, Chalkbeat Detroit, Detroit Public Television, ProPublica, the Detroit Chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists, First Draft News, Tostada Magazine, New Michigan Media, Detour Detroit, Detroit Documenters, Columbia University School of Journalism, Columbia Journalism Investigations at New York's Columbia University, the PBS series "Frontline," the Brown Institute for Media Innovation at

Columbia University, The 74, Type Investigations and BuzzFeed News.

Join us in 2021

To learn more about funding efforts like the Free Press Summer Apprentice program, internships for aspiring journalists and coverage of crucial issues like economic mobility, please reach out to Jewel Gopwani at jgopwani@freepress.com. Subscribing to the Free Press is another way to support journalism and inspire change. Subscribe at freep.com/impact. 

Free Press events focus on helping out in 2020

Anjanette Delgado Detroit Free Press

Together we fed 20,000 hospital workers and hungry metro Detroiters, dimmed the living room lights to watch Michigan documentaries and ran miles to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for local charities. Many Free Press events went virtual in 2020, but the benefit to our local community — and the need during the pandemic — was real. Here are some of the ways we helped to enrich the lives of Michiganders this year:

Top 10 Cares

A longtime supporter of and authority on the metro Detroit dining scene, the Free Press stepped up for the local hospitality community in a big way in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Michigan just as the Freep's Top 10 Takeover dining series celebrating the year's best new restaurants was preparing to enter its sixth year. With dining rooms closed and restaurants reeling, we had to figure out a different way to provide support. With our sponsor, the Metro Detroit Chevy Dealers, and our charitable partner Forgotten Harvest, we spun-off the Top 10 Takeover into Top 10

Cares, a fundraising initiative that pumped just shy of \$375,000 into the coffers of two dozen of the area's most beloved restaurants while providing some 20,000 hot, scratch-made meals to tired hospital workers and food-insecure metro Detroiters.

Freep Film Festival

The seventh year of Freep Film Festival, a celebration of documentary film, saw it pivoting to a virtual event. When the coronavirus pandemic struck in March, we were just weeks away from an in-person festival that would have hosted thousands at theaters throughout metro Detroit.



YumVillage owner and chef Godwin Ihentuge loads a cart of food while dropping off food for workers at Beaumont Hospital, Wayne on Monday, April 13, 2020 as part of the Rescue Detroit Restaurants / Feed Health Care Heroes program. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

We regrouped and held two festivals featuring online film screenings and discussions: one in April, and a second across five days in December.

Produced by the Free Press newsroom and its business arm Michigan.com, the Freep Film Festival books top documentaries from around the country, while putting special emphasis on films with strong connections to Detroit and Michigan. Great journalism and

great documentary storytelling can inform, inspire and help push the region forward — shining light on our challenges and celebrating our achievements.

Several films that have held their world premiere at the festival have gone on to streaming deals, national broadcasts or both, including “White Boy,” “12th and Clairmount,” “Detroit 48202” and “The Russian Five.” A signature feature

Continued on next page



“Represent” is an intimate look at three first-time female candidates stepping into the political spotlight. In this still from the documentary, Myya Jones wages a write-in campaign for Mayor of Detroit. This film was screened at the Free Press’ 2020 Virtual Film Festival. (Photo: Hillary Bachelder)

of the festival is the in-depth panels we host after screenings. These panels spotlight not only the films, but also the issues they raise. The discussions marry the festival vibe with the Free Press’ journalistic mission, and usually feature our journalists as moderators.

We also offer free educational events geared toward the filmmaking community, including works-in-progress tutorials, gatherings that connect local filmmakers

with national experts, and panel discussions offering insight into the craft of documentary filmmaking. For instance, in 2020 we partnered with Wayne State University’s College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts and nationally known documentarian Judith Helfand to offer a free, virtual three-day seminar on the art of personal storytelling in times of crisis.

In 2020, the festival received financial support from the Ford Foundation and

the Knight Foundation.

For more on the Freep Film Festival, check out freepfilmfestival.com. For sponsorship or other partnership opportunities, contact Steve Byrne at spbyrne@freepress.com or 313-222-5977.

Detroit Free Press Marathon

In July, the staff at the Detroit Free Press Marathon made the decision to make the 43rd running a virtual event as a live, in-person race wasn’t in the community’s best interest for health and safety reasons. Registered participants had a choice to convert to the virtual race or defer to 2021 or 2022. Over 3,700 already registered



When the Detroit Free Press marathon was canceled due to the pandemic, many runners chose to run virtually sharing images of themselves on social media. (Photo: Freep Marathon Instagram)

and new participants took to their neighborhoods during the month of October and ran the distance of their choice — from 1 mile to a full 26.2-mile marathon. Participants received their event bag, which included their shirt, medal, heat sheet and a mock finish line tape, beforehand so they could show their virtual accomplishment on social media. Since 1978, a major component of the event has been the relationship with various charities — and 2020 was no exception. Runners who took part in the Run for a Reason program raised more than \$600,000 for our charity partners.

Among the other events we produce:

- Breakfast Club
- Top 10 Takeover/Restaurant of the Year
- Top Workplaces
- High School Sport Awards
- Wine & Food
- Whisked
- Shining Light Regional Cooperation Awards

For all event promotions, contact Aaron Velthoven at 313-223-4347.



FREEP.COM REACHES
9,100,000
AVG. MONTHLY ONLINE VISITORS



READERS AGREE

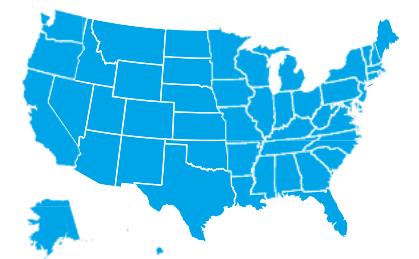
THE FREE PRESS HAS A POSITIVE MISSION TO **HELP THE COMMUNITY BY KEEPING PEOPLE INFORMED**

“I like that the Free Press is working to expose corruption and injustice like journalism is supposed to do. You don't see that very often today.”

“The Free Press is vital to our region. We need you! Thank you.”

OUR REACH

THE FREE PRESS REACHES PEOPLE IN ALL **50 STATES** AND **MORE THAN 200 COUNTRIES**



SOURCE Comscore Media Metrix® U.S. Multi-Platform, Free Press reader survey, June 202 0

On guard since 1831.
freep.com



Detroit Police Sgt. Lacell Rue helps to distribute a food basket to Darlisa Johnson, 39, of Detroit Wednesday, Dec. 23, 2020. The Detroit Public Safety Foundation (DPSF) received a generous donation from the A.A. Van Elslander Foundation for the purchase of food for families on Detroit's East side. The money was used to purchase 730 coolers filled with a holiday meal for a family of four. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)

Detroit Free Press

We're the biggest newsroom in Michigan.

We're journalists and also volunteers and mentors, parents and community members, voters and citizens.

Free Press journalists aim to tell the stories that matter to you and your community, to hold our elected officials accountable and to spotlight the people and places that make our city and state unique. Along the way, we have garnered some recognition, including 10

Pulitzer Prizes and four national Emmy awards.

But none of that matters to us as much as our mission:

To be on guard for you.