In-depth stories on a deadline

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Adding depth to your stories while your editor taps his/her foot

Most reporters these days have little time for lengthy investigative stories. But adding depth to a daily or weekend story can be pretty easy — if you know where to look.

State of Wisconsin resources

The legislative, executive and judicial branches of Wisconsin government all maintain databases and resources that can be tapped on deadline. Some are easy to navigate; others take some practice.

[Wisconsin Legislature](#) website

Bills, laws, administrative rules, veto messages, attorney general opinions can be found [here](#).

Sign up to track the progress of bills [here](#).

Search the entire website [here](#).

Answer questions such as: Has the Legislature ever tried to regulate drones?

[Yup](#)!

Legislative service agencies

The Legislature has four service agencies that provide information to lawmakers and the public.

They are the Legislative Reference Bureau, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Legislative Council and the Legislative Audit Bureau.

Legislative Reference Bureau

The Legislative Reference Bureau has a wealth of information on bills, including drafting records, state programs and the history and impact of state legislation.

Its reference librarians can be reached at 608-266-0341 or lrb.reference@legis.wi.gov.

Legislative Reference Bureau resources

What are examples of what you can find?

A [history of redistricting in Wisconsin](#).

A [summary of legislation](#) in the last session.

Files [used to draft bills](#).

The [Blue Book](#), packed with useful information including official biographies and election totals over time.

Reference Bureau key to this quick-hit story

Using drafting files, I showed that a multimillionaire [had written](#) a controversial bill to reduce his child support

Wealthy divorced donor helped write controversial child-support bill

January 10, 2014 4:45 pm • By Dee J. Hall | Wisconsin State Journal   (255) Comments

Columbus developer Michael Eisenga, shown here in a 2012 photo, helped write a controversial bill before the Legislature that would help him lower his child-support payments.

(1) More Photos

Related Documents

Selected drafting records, Assembly Bill 540

A controversial bill that would allow high-income parents to avoid paying tens of thousands of dollars a year in child support was written with the help of a wealthy donor to the bill's author, Rep. Joel Kleefisch.

The Oconomowoc Republican acknowledged Friday that Michael Eisenga, a multimillionaire business owner, and his attorney helped write the bill, which could pave the way for Eisenga to force the court to reopen his divorce settlement.

The lawmaker insisted in an interview that the measure, Assembly Bill 540, would not affect Eisenga's case.

"I'm certain the bill would not affect Mr. Eisenga in any way because it's not retroactive," Kleefisch said. "He wanted it retroactive. It's not retroactive."

However, the bill would require judges to lower child-support payments if they are 10 percent or more above the amount that would have been ordered using the new requirement. That requirement caps incomes subject to child-support payments at $150,000 a year.

Kleefisch's bill also would prohibit judges from taking into account a parent's assets in determining the level of child support.

Court documents show Eisenga, a Columbus developer, owner of American Lending Solutions and the former mayor of Columbus, was ordered to pay a minimum of $15,000 a month for his three children based on his 2010 income of $1.2 million and assets of $30 million.

Legislative Fiscal Bureau

The [Fiscal Bureau](#) maintains a wealth of reports on state spending. For example:

The [history](#) of tax credit program for the poor

Taxes on [alcohol and tobacco](#) in Wisconsin

Wisconsin's [school choice](#) program

UW System [tuition](#)

Everything about the [state budget](#).

Legislative Council

The [Legislative Council](#) serves as Legislature's law firm. But it also maintains a wealth of information on its website for the public. Most helpful is the Legislative study committee sites. All testimony, reports and data submitted to these committees is posted on the website. It's a great way to find people knowledgeable about issues being debated in the state.

Recent legislative study committees

Alcohol Beverages Enforcement

Bail and Conditions of Pretrial Release

Child Placement and Support

Direct Primary Care

Minor Guardianships

Property Tax Assessment Practices

Identification and Management of Dyslexia

Investment and Use of the School Trust Funds

Use of Police Body Cameras

Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations

Legislative Audit Bureau

The <u>Legislative Audit Bureau</u> peeks behind the veil of state government. As an independent, nonpartisan body, it is a source of authoritative information. If you heard that the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp.
[failed to verify promised jobs](#) in exchange for taxpayer money or that [lottery sales are up a bit](#), chances are that's the work of the LAB.

Executive

The executive branch of state government consists of many agencies and departments.

Most agencies under Gov. Scott Walker had a policy of only allowing press access to spokespeople. The atmosphere appears somewhat looser under Gov. Tony Evers.

Here is a [list of agency contacts](#).

Department of Administration

What kind of information can you find on the DOA website:

Current population estimates

Governor's proposed budget

State building projects, including UW

Decisions of the Division of Hearings and Appeals

Department of Natural Resources

Drinking water quality [database](#)

When are the [hunting seasons](#)?

Number and location of [frac sand mining](#) facilities in Wisconsin

Proposed [new DNR rules](#)

Department of Health Services

Is the local nursing home safe?

What was the most common cause of death in Wisconsin in 2016?

How many children have been diagnosed with lead poisoning in Wisconsin?

How many people receive BadgerCare?

Is food stamp usage in the state up or down?

Elections and **Ethics** commissions

Campaign Finance Information System (CFIS)

Current and past elections results

Lobbyists and who/what they're lobbying for

Officials' financial disclosure forms

Other agencies

Department of Public Instruction [Data and Media](#) page

Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. list of [awards and grants](#)

Department of Transportation [crash statistics](#)

Department of Safety and Professional Services, [licenses](#) and [disciplinary actions](#)

Department of Corrections [inmate locator](#)

Judicial

The [Wisconsin Circuit Court Access](#) database is the go-to resource for most reporters.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court and Court of Appeals [case access](#) has full briefs and [decisions](#).

The Wisconsin Judicial Commission site lists [good judges gone bad](#). Check the [Office of Lawyer Regulation](#) for rogue lawyers.

CCAP tricks

Use the advanced search function to find how many similar cases have been filed.

For example, you can search for tickets (FO cases) issued by the state Department of Natural Resources in Columbia County in 2016. How many were there? 158.

Set up an RSS feed for cases you're tracking.

PACER: Federal court database

[PACER](#) (Public Access to Court Electronic Records) is a great resource for obtaining briefs and lawsuits filed in federal court.

This is a fee service but costs are modest: 10 cents a page for a maximum $3 per document. Sign up for an account [here](#).

Useful non-governmental resources

[National Conference of State Legislatures](#)

[Kids Forward](#)

[Wisconsin Democracy Campaign](#)

[The Wheeler Report](#) for press releases by agencies, elected officials and candidates.

[WisBar.org](#) lawyer lookup

Check [WisconsinEye](#) for video/audio of committee hearings, press conferences, etc.

How to find quick in-depth stories?

They come from a variety of sources:

Personal observation: This doesn't look right.

Complaints from individuals or groups about the way a government program works — or doesn't.

Follow stories past the initial tip or observation. Often that's how reporters get the best stories.

How to do a 'quick hit?'

Start collecting records and sources

Keep doing your regular beat or general assignment duties while collecting material

Once you've pulled everything together, carve out some time to write the story

Consider breaking a series of stories and not just one huge investigation

Watch as the additional tips pour in

Keep investigating until all relevant questions are answered.

Use WCIJ!

The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism's mission is to increase the quality and quantity of investigative reporting in Wisconsin and beyond. Contact Andy Hall to receive our free stories at [ahall@wisconsinwatch.org.](mailto:ahall@wisconsinwatch.org)

For advice on reporting, email me at [dhall@wisconsinwatch.org.](mailto:dhall@wisconsinwatch.org)

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