

FIJ – SUPPORTING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING PROJECTS AROUND THE WORLD

People in this Issue

Silvia Viñas
Rob Waters
Rina Palta
Shawn Musgrave
Patrick Sloyan

– In Memoriam –

- It is with sadness that FIJ notes the death of **Patrick Sloyan**, who served for many years on the FIJ Board of Directors. [According to Newsday](#), he died of cancer at home in Virginia on Feb. 4 at age 82. Sloyan won two Pulitzer Prizes during his distinguished career at Newsday: one for reporting how U.S. troops buried thousands of Iraqi soldiers alive during the Persian Gulf War, and a second as part of the Newsday team that covered the 1996 crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island.

Reminder from FIJ



- The Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, a long-standing supporter, has awarded \$75,000 to support its grant-making program for domestic investigations in 2019. This amount includes \$25,000 to be awarded if FIJ raises an additional \$25,000 in new funding before December 31. [Help us](#) reach that matching goal – because, as always, all of it helps to fund even more watchdog journalism. And thanks!

Investigation Spotlights

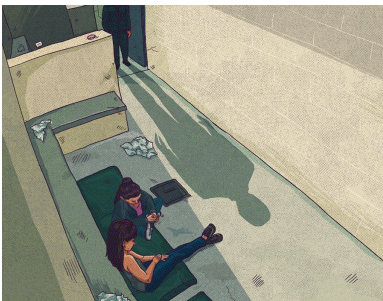


Illustration by Radio Ambulante

- In July 2016, two Guatemalan sisters left their small town and headed to the United States. They were fleeing growing insecurity and were eager to see their mother, who had moved to the U.S. over a decade earlier. After crossing the border, the sisters were detained by two Border Patrol agents and taken to a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) station in Presidio, Texas. There, according to their testimony, a Border Patrol agent sexually assaulted them. In 2018, the younger sister – a minor at the time of the alleged abuse – sued the United States.

Investigation Spotlights *cont'd.*

FIJ grant recipient and Radio Ambulante editor **Silvia Viñas** [has been following this story](#) and the legal case behind it for over a year. She found that complaints of sexual abuse by CBP agents are not isolated and outnumber internal investigations. And she discovered that although the agency claims to have a zero tolerance policy for sexual abuse and assault, it keeps details about this policy and its attempts to tackle the issue in the dark.



In response to an “urban camping” ban, police broke up an encampment of people experiencing homelessness near Coors Field. Photo by Rob Waters

- FIJ grant recipient **Rob Waters** looked at the growing influence of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in cities across the country, and how they are used to restrict homeless people from downtown areas. His investigative feature for Next City, [No Place Left to Go: Business Districts Keep Homeless Populations on the Move](#), focused on Denver, where downtown business interests have long influenced development and management of the urban core. Redevelopment projects and “slum clearance” came first, followed now by the creation of BIDs, which collect property assessments and manage key aspects of public space.

Waters reports that an industry has grown up around BIDs, including contractors that provide private security “ambassadors” to patrol business districts. Some use a

proprietary phone app that allows “ambassadors” to set up a Persons of Interest Database with entries for “panhandler, street performer, vendor, homeless individual.”

In an earlier story in San Francisco Public Press, Waters looked at a report on California BIDs by law students at UC Berkeley School of Law.



Craig Aslin, originally from Virginia, stays in a tent in Hollywood, California. Photo by Susanica Tam for KPCC

- **Rina Palta**, an FIJ grant recipient and correspondent on the investigative team at KPCC radio, has won a [Golden Mike Award](#) for Best Investigative Reporting from the Radio and TV News Association of Southern California.

Her story, [Rats, roaches, bedbugs, mold: Why thousands of LA’s homeless shelter beds sit empty each night](#), led the L.A. County Board of Supervisors to pass a new ordinance creating uniform standards for homeless shelters in the county.

Palta’s initial FIJ-funded story revealed a patchwork oversight system that allowed safety and sanitation problems in homeless shelters – shelters usually run by nonprofit and faith groups, but partially funded by the county. While there are around 43,000 homeless people in L.A., only 16,000 shelter beds are available. Even so, shelters funded by the county’s Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority had only a 78 percent utilization rate, well

Investigation Spotlights *cont'd.*

below the 90 percent required by their contracts. Homeless people interviewed by Palta said that the sanitation and safety issues were main reasons they refused to stay in the shelters.



Photo illustration by Reason

- Over the last two years, the state of Massachusetts has dismissed 47,000 drug convictions and guilty pleas due to two tampering scandals involving drug lab chemists. Many more convictions are likely to be dismissed, with the total expected to exceed 50,000.

While the first scandal received more attention, mainly because it was first and took place in Boston, the second, centering on chemist Sonja Farak, may be worse, says FIJ

grant recipient **Shawn Musgrave**. In [a story for Reason](#), he writes that Farak's crimes were compounded by

prosecutorial misconduct that the state's top court called "the deceptive withholding of exculpatory evidence by members of the Attorney General's office."

Because of the combined tampering and prosecutor misconduct, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court dismissed thousands of cases Farak may never have even touched, including every conviction based on evidence processed at her Amherst lab from 2009 to the day of her arrest in 2013.

Musgrave's story reconstructs both scandals, and questions why a handful of prosecutors presided over one of the worst criminal justice failures in recent Massachusetts memory.

This FIJ Newsletter was compiled by Jerry Redfern.

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