

Milwaukee reporters tell how Pulitzer-winning series was done ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Cashing in on kids - original story ^[2]

EXCERPTS

One of the most awarded stories done in 2009 didn't start out as a "big, giant project," said its author, reporter Raquel Rutledge of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Her 'Cashing in on Kids' series won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for local reporting, as well as the George Polk Award, Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting and the Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism. It documented widespread fraud in Wisconsin's \$350 million, taxpayer-subsidized child-care system.

Rutledge told journalists attending a Reynolds Center workshop at the Journal Sentinel that the story began with a call to the newsroom from a tipster. The information was passed to Rutledge because she was working the consumer-fraud beat at the paper.

She tested the tipster's veracity by asking: "How do you know?" "Did you see it? Do you have documents?"

The tipster did have documents, and Rutledge also requested from the government the same documents, which came back redacted, to make sure they were real.

Once that first story was published, which documented \$30,000 scammed by a single provider, more tips started coming in, including that criminals were benefiting from the program. With the help of database reporter Ben Poston, she was able to find more than 400 providers in the system who had criminal records.

She also heard that drug dealers had infiltrated the program. A comparison of the provider list to search warrants turned up a couple of dozen hits that required more research, including pulling each search warrant, to see what happened at the address and whether a day care was operating there at the time. The result was a story that led:

"More than a dozen Wisconsin child-care centers that reaped millions of dollars in state subsidies have had close ties to drug-dealing operations, including big-time crime bosses."

Another story found that child-care providers were offering free gas, free rent, vacation getaways, \$1,000 rebates and other incentives to encourage parents to enroll their four- and five-year olds in day care rather than full-day kindergarten.

After the stories, a crackdown resulted in the elimination of funding to 140 providers and the passage of new laws.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office also did a check of the program, called the Child Care and Development Fund, in five states - New York, Washington, Michigan, Texas and Illinois. Its results, published in September, found that the states "were vulnerable to fraud because states did not adequately verify the information of children, parents, and providers and lacked adequate controls to prevent fraudulent billing."

Nationwide, the program received \$7 billion in fiscal 2009 to help eligible low-income, working parents pay for child care.

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-reprinted from the Reynolds Centre Business Journalism

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