

Dear judges:

Uncovering and telling stories using public records is part of the nonprofit Baltimore Banner's DNA. It spans all beats and coverage areas, where our journalists over the past year have used documents, emails, data, surveillance photos and camera footage obtained through public records requests to hold powerful people and public agencies accountable, to shed light on what is happening behind the scenes and to give readers a fuller and deeper understanding of important issues they face.

The Banner's data team relied on public records for almost every project it produced in 2023. Beyond databases it obtained, the team also used computers to systematically compile public records posted on the internet, worked closely with records custodians to produce the highest quality data in open data portals, used public record photographs and video in its visual investigations, and even successfully sued for access to records.

The Banner sued the Maryland Office of the Chief Medical Examiner after the office refused to turn over key aspects of autopsy reports, such as toxicology reports and demographic information. Our lawyers spent the past year fighting for our right to the information, and we recently were informed that the judge in the case sided with us, and [ordered the office to turn over the records](#).

The Banner has used web scraping to extract public data from websites. When the data team needed auto theft data from the Baltimore County for its [in-depth package on the rise in auto thefts](#), it used a web-scraping robot to collect information on every auto theft from the county's crime dashboard. The same thing happened when the Maryland Judiciary refused a public records request for civil court records available on its website, The Banner authored another web-scraping robot to systematically collect the records it used in reporting [the eviction epicenter in Anne Arundel County](#) and to show that [Maryland hospitals had stopped suing its patients](#) over unpaid bills.

Among other uses of public records to tell stories in 2023:

- The Banner used data obtained through a public records request in its [investigation of the Baltimore City tax sale process](#). The process ultimately took more than two months of back and forth between the custodian and data reporter Nick Thieme. The story demonstrated that poor Black communities bear much of the pain inflicted by the system, spurring proposed legislation to end the practice.
- A data analysis of state vehicle-crash data and Baltimore citations showed that more than a year after Baltimore City Department of Transportation officials flipped the switch on two new speed cameras on Interstate 83, [car crashes have significantly decreased](#).
- The Banner requested and obtained hundreds of pages of documents, which included emails that shed light on [how a series of errors cut off Baltimore's access to \\$10 million in housing grants](#).
- Baltimore City records obtained through a public records request helped Banner reporters shed more light on the [lead-up to the chaotic chain of events](#) in January that resulted in the resignation of the city's director of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts, or BOPA, and a last-minute dash to hold the city's annual MLK parade.
- In some cases, the Banner obtained documents that offered new details related to high-profile news events from years earlier. Documents included in the state prosecutor's case for criminal charges against Roy McGrath included an affidavit from then Gov-Larry Hogan that [shed new light on how he had learned of McGrath's alleged fraud](#).

- Reporter Hallie Miller routinely used public records for her Better Baltimore series, which uses readers' feedback and ideas to hold government agencies and powerful entities accountable. One example was obtaining more than 900 survey responses to help readers understand [how difficult it is to get a permit in Baltimore](#).
- Visual investigations reporter Brenna Smith used dozens of hours of footage from Baltimore's surveillance camera program to show that footage of the Brooklyn Homes mass shooting [was likely obstructed by a tree, which the city later cut down](#).
- After getting multiple reports of a surveillance plane flying over West Baltimore, Brenna Smith requested hundreds of records from the Federal Aviation Administration about the plane's registration, flight records, and equipment onboard. She was able to [link the plane's registered address and owner to an FBI spy plane operation](#).

Our work has even led to the public release of information that was previously withheld. Banner reporters spent weeks [attempting to uncover the names](#) of a group of alleged abusers and church officials whose alleged conduct wasn't widely known and whose names were redacted from the Maryland attorney general's report on child sexual abuse within the Archdiocese of Baltimore for procedural reasons. A judge would later cite that reporting in his decision months later to [release a largely unredacted version of the report](#).

The Banner has also worked directly with custodians and government information technology specialists to improve public databases released through open data portals. A publicly available Maryland State Police crash database missed more than half of all fatalities from traffic crashes in the state. After questioning officials about the data discrepancies, the agency created a new process to release the data publicly that did not have the same deficiencies.

The data team also worked closely with the Baltimore Police Department to provide feedback to its information technology team when errors arose in their public export of the city's crime database, including instances where multiple versions of the Part 1 Crimes data had locations that were unreliable. By working with officials creating these public exports instead of formally requesting more robust versions ourselves, we increased access and transparency for all Marylanders.

For our relentless push for access to a wide variety of public records to tell and uncover important stories, we nominate The Baltimore Banner for the James S. Keat Freedom of Information Award from the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association.

Richard Martin  
Deputy Managing Editor