

The Baltimore Banner
621 East Pratt Street, Baltimore, MD 21202
thebaltimorebanner.com



To whom it may concern,

Shocking numbers of fentanyl deaths is a tragically common storyline in virtually every big U.S. city. But when The Baltimore Banner decided to tackle the topic, it did so in an extraordinary way.

Determined to push past the easy narrative that the deaths were sad but inevitable, the start-up nonprofit newsroom dedicated multiple journalists to the effort for more than two years. It spent more than \$500,000 on a legal battle to force local officials to turn over basic public records documenting the deaths. It partnered with The New York Times's Local Investigations Fellowship, gaining additional editing muscle for the project and exposing the coverage to a wider audience. It started a groundbreaking collaboration with local outlets in other cities to distribute its sophisticated data analysis across the country.

The reporting posed exceptional challenges. Many sources were struggling with homelessness and addiction, and staying in contact took herculean efforts. Reporters Alissa Zhu and Jessica Gallagher spent so much time in neighborhoods struck by addiction that they witnessed an overdose. On at least five separate occasions, Gallagher sat for hours in fast food parking lots, looking for sources who had promised to meet, sometimes fitfully dozing as she waited into the night to see if they would ever appear.

For its part, the city government tried to thwart the reporters at every turn, responding to the story by organizing a campaign to shut down discussion of the crisis. Some top public health officials refused interview requests. After the first article ran, the mayor tried repeatedly to spin a conspiracy theory that it had been planted by the opioid industry. When City Council members tried to call hearings, the mayor simply canceled them.

The articles triggered immediate reaction. Three days after a troubled treatment provider was profiled, state regulators moved to shut it down. It has since stopped providing treatment, and the housing it also runs is now under investigation by the city.

The stories did more than chronicle a major American city's failure to curb drug deaths. They explained and unraveled causes of the fentanyl crisis. They showed ways local leaders can make a difference even in the face of seemingly intractable social ills. Most importantly, they brought attention to a population that had been ignored for far too long. One mother who lost her son to overdose cried upon reading the stories. "Thanks for letting us heal," she said.

We're proud to submit this coverage for your consideration for the Courage in Journalism Award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kimi Yoshino'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Kimi Yoshino
Editor in Chief

Kimi@TheBaltimoreBanner.com