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## **2024 McCree Journalism Awards Announced**

Again, this year, Journalism projects that examined, explained and exposed problems and important issues in law enforcement and the legal system were chosen as the winners of the 50th annual Wade H. McCree Advancement of Justice Awards, sponsored by the Michigan Press Association Foundation.

The winners were determined by a panel of three judges, representing law and media, who independently reviewed eleven entries from across Michigan.

The winners are:

- Reporter Kara Berg of the Detroit News for series of stories on “Michigan Kids keep dying on Child Protective Services’ watch.” This series helped expose major flaws in the bureaucracy at Michigan’s Child Protective Services agency. Importantly, the reporting offered potential solutions for policymakers to consider as they pursue their own investigations and justice for these victims of child abuse and neglect. Detroit News reporter Kara Berg has been tracking child abuse cases where children died during an ongoing Child Protective Services case for several years. In her years-long reporting, Kara started to see a pattern of cases where kids were seriously injured or killed after family, friends, etc, made CPS reports and the cases were either investigated or punted to the side by investigators. When a 5-year-old boy was found dead in a suburban Detroit house his aunt dubbed the “house of horrors,” Kara began a deeper investigation into how this state agency was handling repeated abuse allegations.
- Reporter Lauren Gibbons of Bridge Michigan for her columns “Juvenile Justice carries high costs: Crippling Debt for Parents.” It’s a pattern seen over and over in wrongful conviction cases: testimony from incentivize traveled from Detroit, to Hillsdale to Macomb County to document the plight of families deep in debt for court fees imposed on juvenile offenders. People like Ernest Bracanovic, a war refugee from Yugoslavia who, as a teen in Macomb County, spent the bulk of his teenage years in juvenile detention for assault and illicit substances. He amassed more than \$100,000 in debt because Michigan law allowed judges to impose fees on juvenile offenders and their families for everything from drug tests and counseling to detention (which averages \$100-300 per day). Gibbons researched and reported on studies showing thousands of families collectively owed millions of dollars in juvenile fees. One study showed Macomb County families with children in juvenile detention owed, on average, \$87,000 in court debts. Another study showed at least \$28 million in juvenile fees assessed statewide between 2017 and 2019. A third study revealed ten Michigan counties kept such unpaid court fees open indefinitely, in some cases pertaining to juveniles who are now deceased. As State Senator Stephanie Chang, D-

Detroit, told Bridge Michigan, “The whole point of juvenile justice is to make sure that we're rehabilitating and then getting folks on track to success. But how can you do that when people are saddled with an enormous amount of debt from the court, where it's hindering their ability to get ahead and move forward? ... It just feels so wrong.” Weeks after Gibbons published her report, the Michigan Legislature passed reforms eliminating most juvenile court fees.

- Reporter Andrea Sahouri of the Detroit Free Press for her column Exposing Racism, Harassment, assault at Detroit’s Renaissance Center.” The initial tip led to Andrea’s locating and reading through hundreds of pages of old court cases, depositions and exhibits to verify what whistleblowers were telling her about the long -- but untold -- history of racism and abuse allegations against the security companies. She sorted through a complicated web of business records to verify who owned the multiple firms and to demonstrate those companies’ ties to the multinational auto company. She didn’t just rely on just public records. She tracked down a mentally ill Black woman who said she was recently beaten by a white RenCen officer and then detained in a basement cell. The woman was never charged with a crime. With compassion, Andrea was able to earn the woman’s trust to tell her story, all while verifying her account with other entities, including the Detroit Police Department. Michigan law gives these private police officers a state-endorsed license to arrest people and carry weapons. And Andrea’s story shed light on the lack of oversight in place at the state level after these licenses are granted.
- Reporter Heather Catallo of WXYZ\_TV for her reporting on “Problems in Probate: Fighting for Accountability and Access” has been working since 2017 to expose the fraud and abuse in the probate courts in Michigan that result in unnecessary guardianships and conservatorships. In 2021, Catallo’s reporting resulted in four bills being introduced in the Michigan legislature. But guardianship reform has opponents: the judges in the system and the lawyers who work as professional guardians. In 2023, Catallo exposed how the Michigan Guardianship Association worked to kill those bills. She also revealed recordings of a well-known probate judge helping professional guardians and lawyers push back against family members fighting for their loved ones. This reporting not only held the judge accountable, it educated the public about the law and the reforms needed in the probate courts. In addition to exposing the problems with the guardianship system, Catallo is committed to informing and educating the public about other legal remedies available for families. Her coverage of the effort to add Supported Decision Making to Michigan’s laws was welcomed by the disability community and local families. With so many problems in the guardianship system, alternatives to “civil death” must be explored. Catallo also explored new efforts to enhance Michigan’s Power of Attorney laws, another essential step in helping families avoid guardianship.

The McCree awards are named for Judge Wade H. McCree (1920-87) one of the most distinguished lawyers and jurists in Michigan history and a staunch advocate for equal rights and

open, accountable government. McCree served as a circuit, federal and U.S. Appeals court judge and, from 1977-81, as solicitor general of the United States.

The coveted McCree awards are based on the significance and informative level of journalism, as well as the impact on changing and improving the legal and law enforcement systems.

The awards will be presented to the winners at the 2024 Michigan Journalism Hall of Fame dinner on April 14<sup>th</sup> at the Kellogg Center.

The Michigan Press Association Foundation was created in 1980 to further the interests of journalism in Michigan. The Foundation's mission includes serving the public interest by encouraging, fostering, and aiding improvements in the quality, vigor and fairness of Michigan journalism and a free press in the State of Michigan. The Foundation, which also sponsors the Michigan Journalist of the Year competition, has invested more than \$330,000 in Michigan journalism since 1990, including the award of nearly 300 scholarships to college-level journalism students.

Learn more about the MPA Foundation at [michiganpress.org/mpafoundation](http://michiganpress.org/mpafoundation).

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