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To the judges:

Decades ago, California created a special police force to patrol exclusively at its five state developmental centers – taxpayer-funded institutions that house patients with severe autism, cerebral palsy and other major developmental disabilities.

But California Watch found that patients inside these centers have been beaten, tortured and raped by staff members and that the police force has done an abysmal job bringing perpetrators to justice.

Reporter Ryan Gabrielson, a Pulitzer Prize winner, exposed the depths of the abuse while showing how sworn officers and detectives wait too long to start investigations, fail to collect evidence and ignore key witnesses – leading to an alarming inability to solve crimes inflicted upon some of society’s most vulnerable citizens.

Gabrielson’s 18-month investigation about the Office of Protective Services snowballed over the course of 2012 – resulting in five major installments from February to November. He found that dozens of women were sexually assaulted inside state centers, but police investigators didn’t order “rape kits” to collect evidence, a standard law enforcement tool. Police waited so long to investigate one sexual assault that the staff janitor accused of rape fled the country, leaving behind a pregnant patient incapable of caring for a child. The police force’s inaction also allowed abusive caregivers to continue molesting patients – even after the department had evidence that could have stopped future assaults.

In one egregious physical abuse case, a caregiver was suspected of using a Taser to inflict burns on a dozen patients. Yet the internal police force waited at least nine days to interview the caregiver, who was never arrested or charged with abuse. In another case, a 50-year-old autistic man died after he was discovered on his bedroom floor with a broken neck. Three doctors said someone likely had caused the fatal injury. But critical errors by police investigators made solving the case next to impossible. Gabrielson also revealed that the force’s police chief, a former firefighter, had no training in criminal investigations and that local police agencies were being left in the dark about potential crimes.

Many of the victims chronicled by California Watch – including 11 of the 12 stun gun victims – are so disabled they cannot utter a word. Gabrielson gave them a resounding voice.

“This is the type of reporting that ends up actually saving lives,” wrote Patricia L. McGinnis, executive director of California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform, in thanking Gabrielson and California Watch, which is part of the Center for Investigative Reporting.

Broken Shield prompted far-reaching change, including a criminal investigation, staff retraining and new laws – all intended to bring greater safeguards and accountability. Among the reforms that are a direct result of our reporting:

- Gov. Jerry Brown ordered that the entire police force undergo extensive retraining, and he appointed an independent monitor to overhaul the Office of Protective Services' policies.
- The governor also signed two bills – one requiring that outside law enforcement be notified of suspected crimes inside developmental centers and another mandating that the agency be led by a law enforcement veteran.
- The state took steps to revoke the license of the most troubled developmental center, in Sonoma – the scene of one-third of the patient rapes as well as the Taser incidents.
- The California Highway Patrol assumed control of the police force at the Sonoma center.
- Local prosecutors launched a criminal investigation of the stun gun abuses.
- State officials embarked on an audit of the entire police force's practices.
- The police force's chief was demoted.

Gabrielson and data analyst Agustín Armendariz also found that despite their sloppy job performance, officers and detectives at the Office of Protective Services got paid more overtime than their peers at similar-sized police agencies. Officers even collected extra pay to patrol one developmental center long after it had been closed. As a result of our dogged journalism, the state launched yet another investigation focused on the police force's overtime abuse.

None of the reporting came easily. Gabrielson encountered one reluctant source after another. Police officials closed ranks. And the state health agency blacked out nearly every word contained in scores of additional abuse cases against patients. We sued, prompting a Superior Court judge to order the release of the uncensored documents. But the state has appealed, keeping the records hidden for now. We will continue fighting for public access to these files.

Eight of California's largest newspapers ran our stories on their front pages. Video producer Monica Lam produced a broadcast segment that aired in every major market. Gabrielson and multimedia producer Carrie Ching created two haunting videos that drilled down on specific cases – one about the patient who was allegedly raped by the staff janitor and another that detailed the mysterious death of the 50-year-old autistic man, a likely homicide victim. Working on every platform helped to maximize audience reach and heighten the impact. We also scheduled a community forum in Sonoma for early 2013, to draw stakeholders who live near the state center threatened with license revocation.

The 1,600 patients at these five state centers deserve every ounce of our efforts. We are extremely proud that Broken Shield spurred reforms that will ensure greater protections and justice for every one of them.

Sincerely,



Mark Katches
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