



Grantee Story on Native Alaskan Rape Leads to ACLU Lawsuit



Clarice "Bun" Hardy stands on the beach with her dog in the Native Village of Shaktoolik, Alaska. Hardy, a former 911 dispatcher for the Nome Police Department, says she moved back to her village after a sexual assault left her feeling unsafe in Nome. (AP Photo/Victoria Mckenzie)

FIJ grantee Victoria Mckenzie traveled to Nome, Alaska, in the bitterly cold months of winter last year to investigate whether the criminal justice system was ignoring Alaska native rape victims.

In Nome, a city of fewer than 4,000 fulltime residents that serves as a regional hub for dozens of smaller villages along western Alaska's Bering Strait, rape survivors and their supporters said the city's police department often fails to investigate sexual assaults or keep survivors informed about their cases, even after victims undergo invasive rape exams.

Alaska has a [sexual assault rate four times](#) the national average, and that figure is six times higher in Nome. Alaska Native people are disproportionately victims of sexual assault, making up nearly half of the victims in reported felony-level sex offense crimes across the state. This statistic is reflected in the crisis in Nome, where more than half of the population is Alaska Native but top local government positions are held by white and non-Native individuals.

Mckenzie temporarily moved to Nome from New York City to report the story. To build relationships with rape survivors and police sources, she immersed herself in the community. She lived in a trailer she rented for \$800 a month, bathed at a local rec center and slept in her parka. To access Wi-Fi she had to walk to the local hospital, two miles outside of town.

She met and documented the stories of survivors like Clarice Hardy, a former police dispatcher who reported she had been raped, and had Snapchat video evidence to prove it.

"Few were listening to these survivors," Mckenzie said. "My job for 3 months was to not go away, to not stop listening."

Her story, for the Associated Press, included interviews with survivors as well as data showing that arrests for sexual assault in Nome fall way below the national average. Her reporting also led her to Anchorage and surrounding areas to meet with activists, national prosecution experts and state prosecutors.

Mckenzie's report, [published by the Associated Press](#) and [National Native News](#), was selected for the [Pulitzer Center's Breakthrough Journalism Award](#), and helped spark an [ACLU lawsuit](#) that seeks to end racial bias in sexual assault investigations in Nome. The lawsuit was filed in February, alleging that Native Alaskan women are being discriminated against based on race when their rape allegations are not taken seriously.

In the end, Mckenzie said FIJ's unique support, which included pro-bono guidance from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, was critical.

"This was not a story you could tell from a desk," she said. "I had to be there to understand the community aspect of this story, to feel what it was like to be in the police station, to rely on your neighbors. I think that comes through in my reporting."

Our Grantees' Recent Work

FIJ Grantee Creates Searchable Database of COVID-19 Information

FIJ grantee Derek Kravitz and his team at [Columbia University's Brown Institute for Media Innovation](#) have created an online repository of local, state and federal public records obtained through open-records requests.

The new site, called [Documenting COVID-19](#), allows users to search for relevant document sets and records by state or thematic tags. So far, Kravitz and his team have compiled 50 document sets across 29 states and have published accompanying [news stories](#) with national outlets like [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#), and local outlets like [Colorado Public Radio](#), [The Kansas City Star](#) and [The Omaha World-Herald](#).

The database is the first of its kind and enables anyone to peruse state documents to find new information and trends regarding coronavirus.

"This shows that these types of documents, which are often months old, can inform current understandings," Kravitz said. "An email from March can help us piece together

what is happening today.”

Explore Documenting COVID-19

Grantee's Investigation Finds Health Departments Aren't Equipped to Respond to Climate Change Related Deaths



*Salvation Army volunteer Jackie Rifkin tries to keep cool as she works at a hydration station in Phoenix amid temperatures at near-record highs on June 19, 2017.
(AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)*

[Climate change is killing Americans](#). Heat now causes more deaths than hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods in most years, creating a new public health threat. But health departments aren't equipped to respond.

FIJ grant recipient Bridget Hickey and colleagues Ali Raj, Dean Russell, Elisabeth Gawthrop, and Veronica Penney from Columbia Journalism Investigations used data, reviewed thousands of pages of government records, and interviewed over 100 people to reveal how a decade of neglect and politics undermined the CDC's fight against climate change.

The story was produced in collaboration with the [Center for Public Integrity](#) and co-published in [The Guardian](#). It has been cited by nearly a dozen publications, including Mother Jones, The Nation, and Grist.

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