

# FRANKLIN CENTER NEWS

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## Establishment media, government like one big dysfunctional family

BY CHRIS BUTLER | FEBRUARY 5, 2015  
WATCHDOG.ORG

It was the summer of 2003, and I'd just gotten my first newspaper job in a small northern Louisiana town, which initially reminded me of Mayberry, but, as it turns out, was a bit nastier.

There, I learned my first lessons about how government officials manipulate the media in exchange for good press — and how vindictive they are when you don't play along.

Two stories I've covered this month, one in Louisiana, the other in Tennessee, made me remember that particular summer.

In Louisiana, for whatever reason, county commissions are known as parish police juries. The members of this particular police jury squabbled

amongst themselves like 5-year-olds whose parents hadn't even tried to teach them self-restraint.

The police jury president was a publicity hound with a smooth country tongue who made sure the media gave him credit for every taxpayer-subsidized project the parish got money for.

I was responsible for covering these people.

I quoted their tantrums during jury meetings verbatim.

Since only one or two other people from the public bothered to attend, I thought I'd let readers see a real portrayal of who and what they had elected.

The fact my boss advised me to focus only on the positive aspects of these meetings was somehow lost.

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I wasn't the lone rabble-rouser.

My predecessor didn't write about rainbows and unicorns when covering this police jury either.

If there was anything these bickering jurors could agree on, it was that I and my predecessor didn't portray them wonderfully enough.

They took away the newspaper's status as the official parish journal, meaning we no longer received money for publishing the parish's legal notices.

The competing newspaper, which had only a tiny fraction of our readership, and whose one writer/publisher had gone out of its way to write flattering, kissy-pooch articles about jurors, became the official parish journal instead.

Flash forward to 2015.

In Vidalia, Louisiana, local, state and federal taxpayers poured \$16 million into a port along the Mississippi River. Like the promises of many other taxpayer-subsidized projects that preceded it, this port is supposed to do wonders for economic development.

Yet Mayor Hiram Copeland told Louisiana Watchdog that no private companies have yet made a 100 percent commitment to do business there.

The day my story ran, Vidalia's marketing and public relations director and the Concordia Parish Economic Development director sent emails insinuating I was obligated to give their area positive publicity, and I had failed.

Then Copeland called and made a remark that perfectly illustrates the No. 1 problem with journalism today.

"Everything that has been written in other media about this port has been

positive — except for your article," Copeland said.

This isn't just a problem at the local level, either.

In her new book, "Stonewalled," former CBS News reporter Sharyl Attkisson writes how reporters at the national news level take government officials at their word, without question.

There is no skepticism of government.

About 600 miles away from Vidalia, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one member of the city council, and possibly more, is trying to silence the one city council member, Trina Baughn, seemingly trying to hold Police Chief James Akagi accountable.

A massive turnover of police has occurred under Akagi's leadership, and a former police officer says in a formal complaint that Akagi's alleged lack of people skills and personal vindictiveness are to blame.

Akagi, I must add, whether accidentally or not, fed me false information last year about a case.

Baughn wants to hold Akagi accountable, yet one council member has accused Baughn of bringing negative publicity to the city — and harming the city's economic development efforts.

That council member, Charlie Hensley, wants the council to slap her with a formal rebuke Monday and kick her off all future committee assignments.

If other council members go along then they will demonstrate they care little for the truth.

I know from my newspaper experience that publishers, while it may sound counterintuitive, don't want negative

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## FRANKLIN CENTER NEWS

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# SCHOOL CHOICE: AMPLIFIED



For the Franklin Center, reporting on education reform and the school choice movement is a long-term, organization-wide priority. With five years' experience covering these issues in states all across the country, we've amassed a wealth of expertise that we share willingly in hopes of advancing a national conversation.

To that end, we provide support and training not just for our Watchdog education reporters, but for bloggers, citizen journalists, and other media. In January, we were able to bring 40 of them from across the country to the nation's capital for our Amplify School Choice conference, where they saw firsthand how school choice touches the lives of families across America.

The conference included site visits to two campuses, both leaders in the school choice

movement, and both located in some of Washington, D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods. We first took the group to Archbishop Carroll High School, a private Catholic school. Many students at Carroll are able to attend the school thanks to the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. Originally signed into law and later defunded by President Obama, the program was reauthorized by Congress in 2011. Students from Archbishop Carroll led our group on tours of the school, allowing conference-goers the chance to see students and teachers hard at work.

We next visited the middle school campus of Achievement Prep, a top-rated charter school in Southeast D.C., serving underprivileged children in grades 4-8. The goal of Achievement Prep is to prepare its scholars for high school and beyond, which they achieve by creating an environment that fosters a love of

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Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we've equipped another 40 people across the country to help create a grassroots groundswell for school choice.

learning. Susan Cannon, the school's Chief Academic Officer, told our group about a parent who said her middle-school child used to lack direction and focus even to finish his homework, but now talks about what he wants to study in college. That kind of change is common with Achievement Prep scholars.

During the policy portion of the conference, Robert Pondiscio of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute discussed the importance of curriculum, Gina Mahony of the National Alliance for Public Charters explained the importance of charter schools, and in one of the highlights of the conference, Robert Enlow, President and CEO of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, conducted a live interview with a parent and student from Archbishop Carroll High School. The mother and daughter discussed how the girl's public school had failed to meet their needs and how the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and other school choice programs have made a major difference for their family.

On day two of the conference, bloggers learned about bipartisan outreach from Joe

Williams of Democrats for Education Reform and Virginia Walden Ford of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. Later they got tips on marketing school choice from Greg Reed of the Institute for Justice, Matt Frendewey of the American Federation for Children, and Tanzi West of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Next Ben Scafidi of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice explained the economics of school choice. His research shows that school choice programs can actually save the government money, contrary to the refrain from school choice opponents. To close out the conference, Don Soifer and Naomi DeVaux of D.C. Public Charter School Board discussed their role in bringing greater choice to area parents.

The Franklin Center is fortunate to be able to sponsor a team of full-time education reporters — but they are more effective when they can work in tandem with bloggers, citizen journalists, and other media partners. Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we've equipped another 40 people across the country to help create a grassroots groundswell for school choice. ■



## DONOR SPOTLIGHT

*"We hope our financial support will help the Franklin Center grow, expand and bring the light of reality to more people."*

# WENDELL AND BARBARA HELDT

## Thanks for your continued support and friendship

For Wendell and Barbara Heldt of Monmouth, Oregon, entering their golden years certainly doesn't mean slowing down.

They were family farmers for more than three decades, producing grass seed and wheat, while Barbara also worked as a teacher. Now that they're retired, Wendell still keeps the farm up, all while studying French and volunteering weekly at the Union Gospel Mission. Barbara fills her days with oil painting and working with horses. They are also involved with their church, with the Oregon Food Bank, with CURE International (which provides care and support for children with physical disabilities), and with the Wounded Warrior Project.

Most important, though, they're deeply involved in the lives of their two daughters and five grandchildren, "sharing what we've learned to help them become good people, hopefully people who take responsibility for themselves," says Barbara.

This concern for the next generation, for education and self-improvement, animates everything they do, including their support of the Franklin Center, with which they've been involved for two and a half years.

"We think the biggest problem facing our country is the large percent of the population that is unaware or not curious about what is really going on... Also, we see a transfer of personal responsibility to the government instead of taking personal responsibility for their own lives. It seems that people don't believe anymore that the individual must intervene to make the world better."

Mr. and Mrs. Heldt are most deeply concerned about two related issues. The first is a failing education system that doesn't prepare students to become good

citizens. As a former teacher, Mrs. Heldt hopes to see schools offering a more classical education, teaching critical thinking skills, and presenting a neutral political and social narrative.



Additionally, they say, "We are concerned about the growing gap between reality and what's being reported in the media." They express concern that so many people believe that if a story is in a legacy media source, then it must be true.

"The Franklin Center goal of fairness in reporting is why we became involved with them," Mrs. Heldt says. "We hope our financial support will help the Franklin Center grow, expand and bring the light of reality to more people."

The Franklin Center is proud to include active, caring citizens like Wendell and Barbara Heldt among our supporters. ●



# MEET THE WATCHDOG EDUCATION REPORTERS

Watchdog.org provides extensive coverage of education reform and school choice issues across the nation, thanks in part to the education team!



**PAUL BRENNAN:  
MILWAUKEE,  
WISCONSIN**

Brennan first joined Watchdog.org as our Iowa bureau chief in 2013. Before that, he spent much of his career writing for alternative weekly newspapers in California, where he worked with Will Swaim, who now serves as the Franklin Center’s vice president of journalism. When Watchdog.org added the education reporter position in Milwaukee, Brennan was offered the job because of his interest in inner-city education solutions and his talent for narrative and human-interest writing.

Paul says covering education in Milwaukee is significant because that is where the nation’s first modern school choice program launched 25 years ago. The autonomy and flexibility provided by the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program allows schools to make changes when either a problem is detected or a better way to help kids is discovered.

Unfortunately, most of the media coverage of Milwaukee schools focuses on the problems with this system. Brennan reports on those problems, too, but he makes it a point to cover the many accomplishments of the city’s choice schools to create a balanced portrait of the state of education in Milwaukee.

His reporting so far has covered many facets of education in the city, including the success of local private schools, new teacher certification programs, and charter schools’ attempts at new models of learning.



**MORIAH COSTA –  
WASHINGTON,  
D.C.**

We were pleased to welcome Moriah back to the Franklin Center, where she interned three years ago. Moriah is a graduate of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University, where she specialized

in business reporting. While there, she also interned at *Washington Business Journal*, *Phoenix Business Journal*, and for Reuters wire service.

Given her business background, Moriah understands that education is a key to economic growth and development. It’s important for parents and educators to be aware of the best options available for students, she said, to give them the best opportunity available. She said most educators she has talked to agree on one thing: America needs to reform its education system if it’s going to compete in a global economy and close the achievement gap.

As an example of how school choice can improve students’ education, consider Moriah’s story in which she covered the D.C. Public Charter School Board’s vote to keep Potomac Prep Public Charter School open. While the school’s charter was threatened, more than 300 parents, teachers and students rallied to support

the school, arguing a change in leadership in the previous six months would help them meet their charter agreement. The board ultimately agreed, allowing them to stay open with certain guidelines and measures.



**EVAN GROSSMAN  
– PHILADELPHIA,  
PENNSYLVANIA**

Grossman is a former business editor and journalist whose work has been published by the *New York Post* and the Associated Press. His diverse reporting background includes everything from having the Stanley Cup in the trunk of his car to covering the economic challenges facing Trenton, N.J. He joined Watchdog.org just last year to report on education issues in Philadelphia.

Since he started in Philadelphia, he has covered a number of important education issues bubbling to the surface. Among these are the potential to add more charter schools to the district, a highly anticipated audit of the Philly school system, and the potential resolution of an expired teacher’s union contract with the district that could shape the city’s educational landscape for years to come.

**BRE PAYTON:  
NATIONAL REPORTER**

Bre Payton started working with Watchdog.org as an intern for the Virginia Bureau and



now works the national education beat. She said her own experience as a homeschooler

spurred her interest specifically in covering school choice stories.

This year, she followed the story of Paul Davis, a single father with an autistic son. Davis moved across town to take advantage of the best school he could find — though his only sources of income were monthly Social Security checks and wages as a part-time taxi driver. The Davis story serves as an example of how school choice could help real people gain access to a brighter future.

Bre’s reporting has shown that giving parents the right to choose the school that best fits their child’s needs ensures that all children are equipped to succeed in life. That’s why she said she is eager to spotlight the impact of school choice on the next generation of American leaders, thinkers and doers.



**MARY  
TILLOTSON:  
NATIONAL  
EDITOR**

Mary Tillotson is the education editor for

Watchdog.org, in which role she writes as well as provides strategic direction and mentoring for our education

team and other Franklin Center reporters covering the issue. Her previous experience includes writing for School Reform News and The St. Ignace News in northern Michigan, and the Heartland Institute’s School Reform News.

Mary said she has seen the power of school choice firsthand in stories like one from a mother in North Carolina whose son was aggressively bullied and beaten up multiple times in his public school. Appeals to teachers, counselors and principals went nowhere. But when her son made it into a school voucher program, his outlook on education — and his whole future — turned around.

School choice has more ramifications than people realize, Mary says. It’s an incredible thing when a child has a life-changing opportunity like a quality education, and school choice provides that. She notes that school choice doesn’t just deal with people’s physical needs like safety or economic needs like money, it allows students to meet teachers who honestly believe in their ability to succeed, who really care about their students, and who are free from dealing with a complicated bureaucracy. It may not hold the answer to all our problems, of course, but it certainly nudges the world in a better direction. ●



# 2014: IN REVIEW

Thanks to your loyal and generous support, our fifth year was our most successful yet!

## TOP STORIES

In **Wisconsin**, we've spent more than a year successfully exposing and shutting down a politically motivated prosecution of conservative groups — a "John Doe" investigation that has included gag orders, predawn raids, and the risk of jail time for our reporters.

In **Texas**, we're defending a member of the University of Texas's board of regents who blew the whistle on powerful state legislators pulling strings to get family members and political friends admitted — and our work triggered a statewide investigation.

In **Virginia**, we exposed an intrusive local police program that warehoused license plate and location data from random drivers in violation of state law.

In **Louisiana**, our reporting helped save a 68 year-old peach orchard and small business that EPA regulations threatened to put out of business.

In **New Jersey**, we uncovered numerous instances of public employee pension fraud and abuse, turning the issue into a statewide, bipartisan cause and

**10.4 MILLION**  
Number of pageviews on Watchdog websites in 2014

directly leading to the creation of a pension fraud investigative unit.

In **Kansas**, we led a successful fight to require video livestreaming for all legislative activities, a big win for increased transparency in the state Capitol.

In every state, we're shining the bright light of transparency into government's darkest corners.

We're demonstrating how big government and other powerful institutions have failed us and offering a megaphone to reformers with freedom-oriented solutions.

And we couldn't have done it without your generous support. From concerned citizens in Wisconsin, Texas, Virginia, Louisiana, New Jersey, Kansas, and all across the country — thank you.

## BY THE NUMBERS

We added **eight new reporting positions** this year, including two new state bureaus (Mississippi and Vermont), an

additional Texas reporter, a Western Pennsylvania-focused reporter, two education reporters, a technology reporter, and an energy reporter.

We completed a successful first summer of our Journalism Internship Program with **11 promising student journalists**.

In October — the last month before Election Day — we had **1.4 million pageviews** on our stories, our highest monthly web traffic to date. All told, last year our news stories have seen **10.4 million page views**, a **65 percent increase** over 2013.

We published **6,189 stories** in 2014. Our stories have been placed in or cited by other media **10,739 times**, nearly doubling last year's total of 5,463.

With our ramped-up radio news effort, our reporters appeared on the radio **584 times** in 2014, a **92 percent increase** over 2013.

We presently have **190,135 Facebook fans**, and our stories were viewed on Facebook a whopping **402,353,352 times**. •



# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE STATES

## LOUISIANA

A new port in the Mississippi River town of Vidalia, Louisiana (population 4,300), is scheduled to open this fall after local, state, and federal taxpayers have poured \$16 million into the project. Earlier this winter, Watchdog reporter Chris Butler began to investigate and found that promises of increased economic activity and more jobs are uncertain at best.

In a telling detail, Chris found that no private interests have invested in the port's infrastructure, suggesting that business leaders don't expect the same payoffs that local government does.

In a telephone call, the mayor of Vidalia told Chris, "Everything that has been written in other media about this port has been positive — except for your article ... I think you may have damaged to a certain extent the project we've been working on for 20 years."

Regardless of what other media does, our mission is to question whether government officials use taxpayer money wisely, and we take it seriously.

## VIRGINIA

Watchdog Virginia's report on new "sneak and peak" legislation approved by the Virginia House and Senate is triggering a backlash from civil-liberties activists — and buyer's remorse from some lawmakers.

The pair of bills would extend federal Patriot Act powers to the state Attorney General's Office and allow local law-enforcement agencies to seal administrative subpoenas, so that targets of sweeping subpoenas would not be notified authorities were seizing their financial, phone and computer records.

Both bills passed the House with near-unanimous bipartisan support before our reporter began digging into them. Now, because of our

work, civil liberties activists and some lawmakers launched a rebellion against the legislation, with one delegate telling us that he believes the bills can still be stopped. He told our reporter he expects "some sort of parliamentary move (to derail the legislation) now that people have been alerted."

## WISCONSIN

In the Badger State, Gov. Scott Walker's newly-unveiled budget proposal, released a few weeks ago, include reined-in spending for the University of Wisconsin system. University officials and the media establishment, of course, claimed that the Walker budget would force draconian cuts to essential services.

Our Wisconsin bureau was the first to report that these proposed cuts actually amount to about 2.5 percent of the University of Wisconsin System's

\$6.1 billion budget — and not the 13 percent that administrators claimed.

Wisconsin Reporter also broke the news that the university system is sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars in cash reserves and balances, a significant portion of which is considered discretionary and could be used to offset the doomsday scenarios the System continues to invoke.

After two weeks reporting from the state's establishment media that shamelessly bought into the university system's narrative, they finally began following our lead and including the same facts in their reporting on the Walker plan. Their coverage remains institutionally biased in favor of the university, but at least these news outlets are starting to report some key facts that had been left out of their presentations of the budget picture. ●

## ESTABLISHMENT MEDIA FROM PAGE 2

news about their towns or cities to appear in print. They fear it will discourage new businesses and new economic development opportunities from showing up. Such opportunities, after all, translate to more advertising revenue for the paper.

It's sad how government officials are afraid of holding one other accountable — as they are supposed to.

It's equally sad when people in media are afraid to do the same thing — as they are supposed to.

While negative publicity might harm a town's economic development in the short-run, holding people in power accountable is always better for a community in the long run.

These people who do nothing are like members of a dysfunctional family, too timid to speak up for fear

an honest conversation, instead of resolving problems, might feel too unpleasant. ●

Chris Butler covers Tennessee and his native Louisiana as an investigative reporter for the Franklin Center's Watchdog.org. He has over a decade's experience as a reporter for newspapers in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. He holds degrees from Louisiana Tech and the University of Louisiana.



## THE REST OF THE STORY

# Colorado legislators to address issues uncovered by Watchdog.org

### Judicial secrecy, juvenile detention and more

BY ARTHUR KANE | JANUARY 2, 2015  
WATCHDOG.ORG

Colorado lawmakers have vowed to address a series of issues and problems uncovered by Watchdog.org stories last year, including judicial secrecy, misuse of welfare benefits and attacks at juvenile detention centers.

The Joint Budget Committee members, meeting before the Jan. 7 legislative session officially starts, have already discussed banning some new purchases of Compressed Natural Gas vehicles and questioned administration staff about skyrocketing attacks against juvenile detention employees.

“We’ll have a whole bunch of things on youth detention,” said state. Sen. Kent Lambert, R-Colorado Springs, who serves as JBC chairman, in December. “On the CNG thing, the question

is can supply catch up with demand?”

Watchdog.org investigations exclusively uncovered problems with the management of CNG vehicles and the increased attacks on detention staff in two separate series of stories last year.

After the CNG stories, JBC staff recommended the Legislature stop funding new CNG purchases for some departments.

JBC staff confirmed the state’s cost projections for CNG vehicles likely won’t comply with state law, which requires alternative fuel vehicle purchases only when the lifetime cost is within 10 percent of comparable petroleum vehicles. Watchdog.org stories showed some departments couldn’t use the

vehicles because there were no fueling stations nearby and many state vehicles used less than 30 percent CNG.



“It’s troubling and it’s offensive to a lot of Coloradans to find out what’s going on.”

-State Rep. Tim Dore, R-Elizabeth

A series of stories on skyrocketing attacks on juvenile detention staff also drew JBC scrutiny when the Colorado Department of Human Services wanted to solve the problem by asking taxpayers for nearly \$10 million for additional staff.

JBC members noted that inmate population has declined in the past decade so CDHS should make internal changes to increase staff-to-inmate ratios.



At a hearing last year, State Rep. Jenise May, D-Aurora, said CDHS should look at moving youth around “instead of here’s where I have my youth now and we want to staff up to that.” May will depart the Legislature as she didn’t win re-election in 2014.

The JBC is expected to decide both issues during its figure-setting discussions this month.

Other issues exposed in Watchdog.org stories haven’t come before any legislative committees yet, but key lawmakers promised to address the problems.

When Watchdog.org asked state Sen. Kevin Lundberg, R-Berthoud, about an appellate judge’s ruling that determined the judiciary isn’t subject to state open records laws, he said it isn’t appropriate for a state department to exempt itself from transparency laws.

“I don’t believe the judiciary is above the law,” Lundberg, who is vice chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said last year. “I understand there are legitimate exceptions in CORA in every arena, but everybody has to play by the same rules. The judicial department interprets the law. It’s not their job to rewrite the law to their convenience.”

A Watchdog.org series on welfare recipients withdrawing

taxpayer money at casinos, pot dispensaries and liquor stores and a story about a rule change that will likely increase the amount welfare recipients receive also caught the attention of some lawmakers.

State Rep. Tim Dore, R-Elizabeth, said it’s inappropriate for the state to keep allowing welfare recipients to withdraw tax money at liquor stores, casinos and pot shops when federal and state law bans the practice.

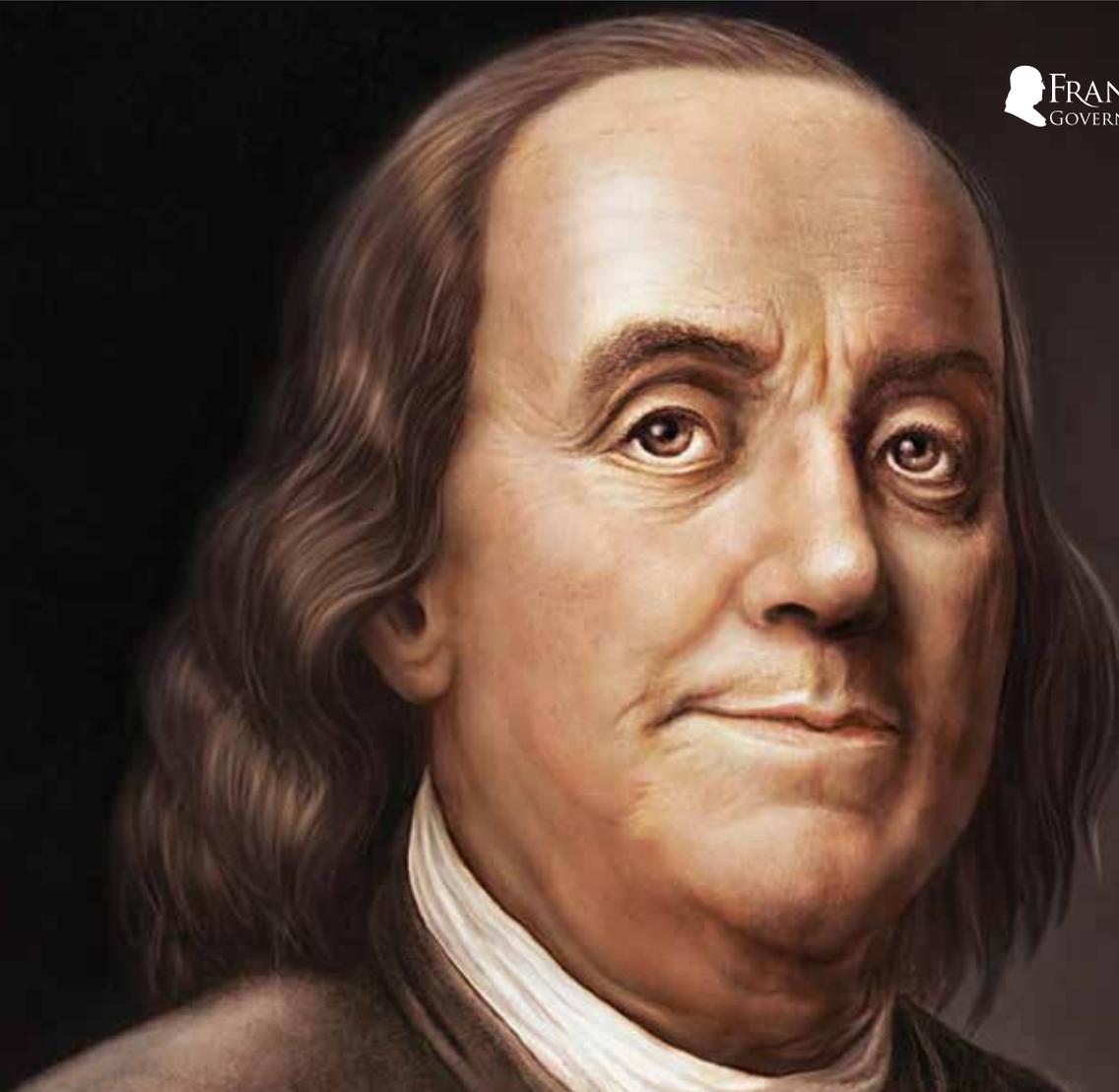
“This is definitely an issue in the coming session,” said Dore when Watchdog.org told him about the withdrawals last year. “It’s troubling and it’s offensive to a lot of Coloradans to find out what’s going on.”

State Sen. Owen Hill, R-Colorado Springs, said he would look into a 2013 CDHS rule change that allowed welfare recipients to keep benefits for up to six months even if their circumstances determine there should be a reduction in payments.

“I have to talk to my colleagues,” said Hill when Watchdog.org informed him of the rule change in November. “There needs to be some real work looking into this.” ■

Last year, thanks to your support, we were able to place award-winning investigative journalist Art Kane in Colorado. He got off to a strong start with three major investigations. He crunches data to demonstrate that the state’s welfare recipients were using their benefits in marijuana dispensaries, liquor stores, and casinos — an investigation that triggered a federal investigation. He uncovered problems at the state’s juvenile detention centers, exposing how a policy change led to a shocking number of physical attacks on employees. And he questioned the shroud of secrecy with which the state judiciary surrounds itself, pressing for greater transparency.

Thanks to your support of Art’s work, we were able to kick off 2015 with the exciting news that the Colorado legislature will be taking up all of these issues this year.



## WE'RE ON A MISSION FROM BEN

**T**he Franklin Center supports investigative journalists, both professional and citizen, who seek to advance transparency, accountability, and fiscal responsibility in government, with a strategic perspective that emphasizes how those issues begin at the state and local levels. We seek ultimately to democratize the media and change how people expect to receive information about their government.

**For more great stories, visit [Watchdog.org](http://Watchdog.org)**