



wbur

INVESTIGATIONS

2021

With your support, WBUR Investigations is uncovering stories of abuse, fraud and wrongdoing across Boston, Massachusetts and New England. The team is digging deep into local issues with national impact, more dedicated than ever to uncovering injustice and providing the community with the information they have a right to know.

This past year, the WBUR Investigations team boasted four full-time journalists. Editor Christine Willmsen and Senior Reporter Beth Healy produced the award-winning “Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch” as a team of two in March 2020. Data Journalist Saurabh Datar was hired in August 2020 and Investigative Reporter Shannon Dooling joined the group of three, quickly gaining momentum and producing powerful investigative journalism. And we’re pleased to let you know that WBUR Investigations is being recognized for its editorial excellence with several prestigious awards (see list to the right), reflecting how this public service journalism makes a difference in people’s lives — through coverage that informs and engages, reveals hidden truths and holds power to account.

As the National Headliner Awards judging panel said, WBUR produces pieces on topics that don’t often get enough discussion. Through effective writing and reporting, WBUR tells stories that are compelling, informative, and to a degree, hear breaking. They do so with your belief and support. We’re grateful to share the impact your generosity has had on our community below.

“Inside the Frenzied Pandemic Market for Medical Masks”

National Headliner Awards
First Place
Radio stations pandemic coverage/project

“Dying On The Sheriff’s Watch”

National Headliner Awards
First Place
Radio stations news series

Awards for Excellence in Health Care Journalism
Third Place
Investigative

*National Murrow Awards
by Radio Television Digital News Association*
First Place, News Series

Public Media Journalism Association
First Place,
Investigative Reporting
Second Place,
Multi-Media Presentation
Second Place, Series

LOCAL GROUNDBREAKING REPORTING WITH NATIONAL IMPACT

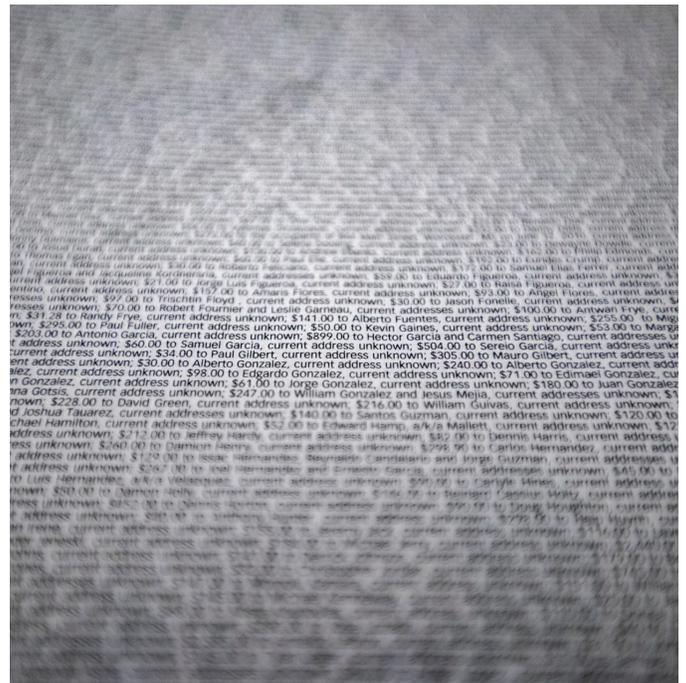
The WBUR Investigations team keeps its ear to the ground for injustices, big and small, throughout the year. The bigger investigations take more time and resources — and WBUR is proud to have published two such stories this past year. These two investigations dive deep into local examples to highlight national issues, and share the findings in multimedia publications, online and on-air.

Lawmakers Call For Reforms To Civil Forfeiture

In August of 2021, a WBUR and ProPublica investigation found that the [Worcester District Attorney's office stockpiles people's money for years, even when their cases were dismissed](#). Under a system called civil asset forfeiture, police and prosecutors can confiscate, and keep, money and property they suspect is part of a drug crime. Trying to reclaim one's money is so difficult, legal experts say it may violate due process rights under the U.S. Constitution. It's especially punishing for people with low incomes.

WBUR's analysis showed that nearly one in four seizures of cash and property for which the Worcester DA's office filed forfeitures in 2018 either were not associated with a criminal conviction or weren't even linked to a criminal drug charge. This is a first-of-its-kind accounting in Massachusetts — the investigation found a lack of public reporting and accountability, resulting in WBUR combing through detailed records and compiling its own dataset.

Through WBUR's reporting, it became clear that Massachusetts has some of the weakest civil forfeiture laws in the nation. Other New England states passed stricter laws in recent years and in federal cases, the law has changed from probable cause to a higher standard of proof: the government must show that property is "likely" connected to a crime in order to forfeit it.



Top: A woman speaking with her attorney outside of the Second District Courthouse of Southern Worcester County in Uxbridge. Bottom: A civil forfeiture notice published in the Worcester Telegram & Gazette in 2016 from the Worcester County DA notifying more than 700 people to take legal action if they want to dispute the DA's claims to their money. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

As a result of the investigation, [lawmakers and criminal justice advocates in Massachusetts are already calling for changes to the laws](#) that govern how law enforcement seizes, and keeps, cash and property confiscated in suspected drug crimes.

- State Sen. Jamie Eldridge said in an interview that he had no idea some DAs were delaying for so long before he read the WBUR/ProPublica investigation. Eldridge said he will talk with fellow lawmakers about setting a forfeiture deadline for DAs, either through new legislation or in a bill that's currently being reviewed by his committee.
- State Rep. Jay Livingstone said he's considering filing such an amendment in response to the WBUR/ProPublica investigation.
- State Sen. Cindy Creem is sponsoring a companion measure in the Senate and recently cited WBUR's investigation in a recent statement.
- Finally, Attorney General Maura Healy's office stated that it is reviewing the current legislative proposals related to forfeiture.

The story is still in early stages. WBUR and ProPublica will stay on top of additional developments. This important investigation was made possible with support from the Pulitzer Center, another critical partnership that recognizes WBUR's high-caliber reporting and broadens its reach.

Investors Mine For Profits In Affordable Housing, Leaving Thousands Of Tenants At Risk

[A week after WBUR's investigation detailing the legal battle](#) between a local affordable housing organization and an out-of-state investment firm, [state officials and federal lawmakers took aim at what they say is a threat to long-term affordable housing](#) — investors looking to extract profits from low-income properties funded by taxpayers.

In Boston's South End, the fight with TDC has a direct impact on nearly 400 residents and in Massachusetts alone, nearly 300 properties will see their tax credit deals expire over the next decade. Many could face the same kind of dispute in the state and beyond: WBUR found additional examples in Michigan, Florida and Washington.

It's a sophisticated and complicated story that many would shy away from. No one

How The Tax Credit Program Works

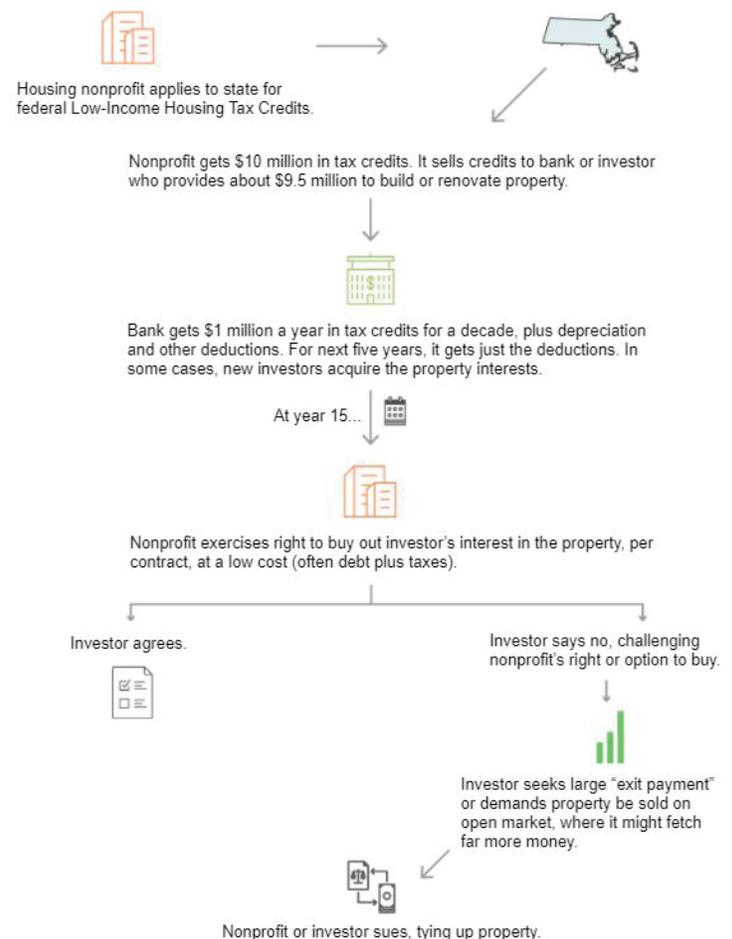


Illustration of a hypothetical case. (Saurabh Datar/WBUR) | Source: State and federal housing agencies, WBUR reporting. Icons by Andrejs Kirma, Made by Made, TwentyVibe from the Noun Project.

else has covered this urgent situation extensively — and the reporting has had a far-reaching impact already. [In April, editor Christine Willmsen appeared on Radio Boston](#) and [in May, WBUR's daily national news magazine, Here & Now, picked up the story.](#)

[In August 2021](#), U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden announced a new bill to close the loophole that allows large investors to seek outsized profits in taxpayer-funded affordable housing. After reading WBUR's report, Mike Kennealy, Massachusetts' Housing and Economic Development secretary, stated he was also looking into the matter.



Charles Clark, of Tenants' Development Corp., walks past an apartment in the South End, one of the affordable housing properties managed by the nonprofit. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

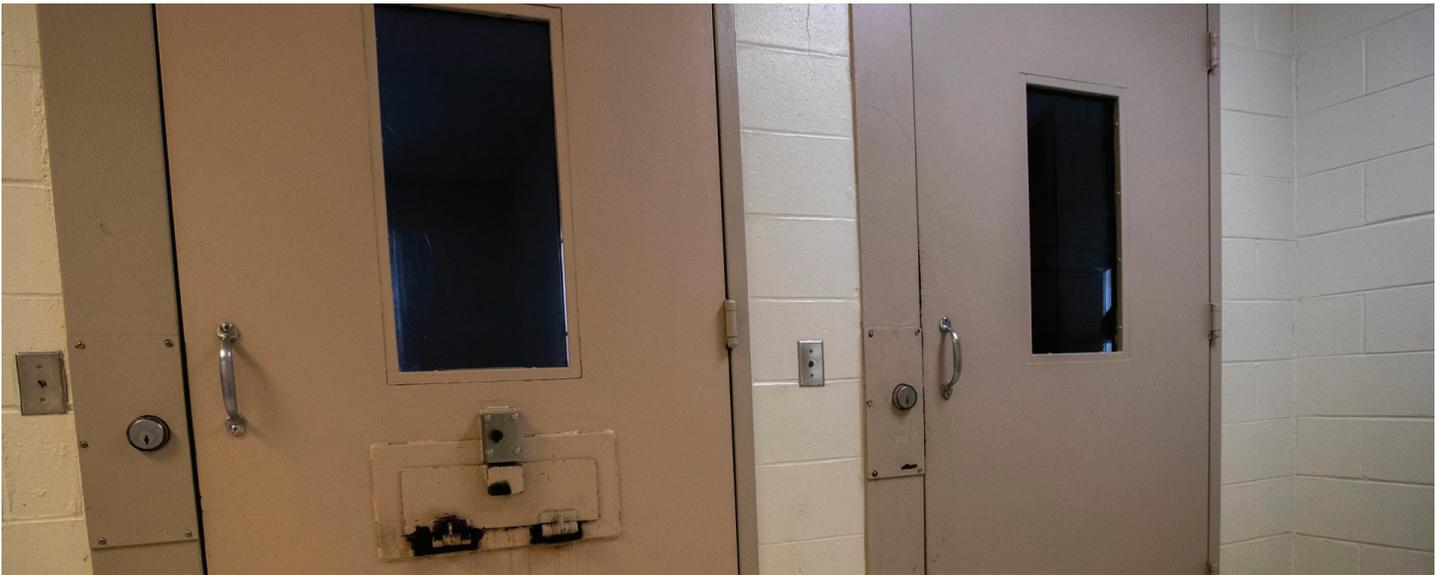
WBUR INVESTIGATES

WBUR has held those in power to account throughout the year, including reporting on conflicts of interest within National Grid and investigating Massachusetts businesses violating COVID-19 safety policies.

[In November 2020, in the wake of reporting by WBUR](#), A.G. Healey's office urged state regulators to require National Grid to hire a new auditor. [WBUR had reported that one of the auditors served on the board of a company that had a long-term fuel supply contract with National Grid](#) — in addition to other conflicts the auditor had with the energy supply firm.

At the end of December, [WBUR published its analysis of Massachusetts businesses based on complaints to the Department of Labor Standards' coronavirus hotline](#) from mid-May through Dec. 1, 2020, highlighting for the public which businesses were potentially hindering the community's pandemic recovery.

The public deserves to know about and understand these issues: businesses that might put both customers and employees in danger.



Cell number 7 at the Suffolk County jail, where Rodrick Pendleton, one of the focuses of the team's investigation, suffered for days before dying due to a bowel obstruction. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

STAYING ON THE CASE

When WBUR Investigations uncovers an injustice, the team stays on the case — ensuring that the reporting is not forgotten.

“Dying on the Sheriff’s Watch” was the team’s first investigative piece, published in March of 2020. It has since won numerous awards and WBUR has continued to track the story. [In January, senior investigative reporter Beth Healy reported on the way the federal government changed its tracking of those who have died in custody just last year.](#) It’s a move that has received little notice, and after reviewing public records from the medical examiner and the Office of Grants and Research, WBUR discovered that it provides even less transparency for the public. The change also removes some of the accountability from elected sheriffs. Healy will report on developments as the new presidential administration continues to make changes.

In the fall of 2020, WBUR reported on tenants experiencing illegal pressure from landlords to leave their homes if they couldn’t pay rent. [The investigations team found this was occurring despite the state and federal moratorium on evictions](#) to protect tenants during the COVID-19 economic crisis. [After WBUR’s reporting, A.G. Healey’s office launched an investigation into one of the landlords WBUR revealed and ultimately is suing him.](#) Healy reported this update in January.

Healy also continued to cover the fallout of the failed delivery of millions of dollars of medical masks to the commonwealth last summer, [reporting on the settlement from the Salem company in June 2021.](#)

Once an issue is uncovered, it doesn’t disappear; nor does it remain in the public eye without effort. An essential piece of WBUR’s commitment to public service is continued reporting on an issue.

COLLABORATION

The recent investigation on civil forfeiture was WBUR's first with **ProPublica**, one of the nation's premier, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative news organizations. Its platform and large national reach results in additional exposure for WBUR.

Just as importantly, ProPublica is a valuable partner in rigorous and impactful story selection, as well as careful editorial and legal review. Developing an investigative piece for publication requires in-depth conversations about the strongest findings, backed by evidence and analysis, and the best way to relay them in a legally sound way. ProPublica's legal review and expertise was a particularly important addition to the civil forfeiture publication. Its staff offer a high level of scrutiny to WBUR's work, making each story stronger. The WBUR Investigations team looks forward to the continued partnership.

In addition to WBUR's collaboration with ProPublica and support from the **Pulitzer Center** for the civil forfeiture investigation, the team maintains its partnership with **El Planeta**, Boston's Latino Daily, to translate its findings into Spanish. The translation and cross-promotion from El Planeta results in WBUR's investigations reaching a critical local audience it wouldn't otherwise.

The team continues to work with **Maine Public Radio (MPR)**, as well. Willmsen has met with the MPR staff to discuss ideas and provide advice on how to focus the story. She's also given additional direction in seeking information and people to interview.

WBUR Investigations' collaboration with the WBUR newsroom has only strengthened in the last year. Saurabh Datar, the team's data reporter, assists other news teams with their stories. He's working with the business team currently and [has played a key role in WBUR's ongoing reporting about the Boston police force](#). The data analysis and visualization Datar does is sophisticated; the fact that WBUR has such skills in-house is powerful. The stories he has worked on wouldn't have been possible without him, enabling the WBUR investigations team to elevate WBUR's reporting overall.

In another crucial development to WBUR's reporting on the Boston police force, [WBUR is suing the Boston police department](#) for refusing to turn over a list of investigations into police officer misconduct. This bold and aggressive action, an important tool for uncovering public records, is a first for WBUR; the confidence of the newsroom in pursuing investigations has grown since the creation of WBUR Investigations.



LOOKING FORWARD

Aside from upcoming stories on civil forfeiture and continued collaboration with others in the WBUR newsroom, the WBUR Investigations plans on expanding their skills. Shannon Dooling, the newest member of the team, but an award-winning veteran WBUR journalist, is working to grow her expertise in public records searches. Datar, Healy, and Willmsen all came to WBUR from print journalism organizations and will continue to hone their audio skills.

In the next year, WBUR Investigations plans to hire a journalism fellow. The team and WBUR as an organization are eager to invest in young reporters who want to be investigative journalists. The additional support will enable the existing team to accomplish even more throughout the year.

In the longer term, the team plans to build their audience, especially online. Increased exposure for WBUR's investigative journalism will result in more people turning to WBUR for watchdog stories. WBUR Investigations hopes to build a reputation that inspires additional news outlets to proactively reach out in order to collaborate.

At this point in time, WBUR Investigations has the human power and the skill set to take on any type of investigative story. The group feels like a true team and all are excited about the options and opportunities that lie ahead of them. They can be more judicious in which stories they cover and they can be very ambitious once they decide to do so. We look forward to keeping you updated.



(Sophie Morse for WBUR)

THANK YOU

The investigations team is a game-changing reporting initiative for WBUR. It has enabled WBUR to produce essential journalism that has had real impact in our community. WBUR Investigations would not be possible without the generosity and support of our funders — your belief in our vision has launched and fueled this effort. Thank you.