For Immediate Release

For more information, call:
Nancy Bilyeau, 212-484-1356
Richard Relkin, 212-237-8645


New York, NY, Jan. 17—A powerful exposé of negligence by the largest private contractor of prison health care, and a series examining the plight of indigenous Alaskans living with no police protection are the winners of the nation’s most prestigious award for justice journalism.

Karol V. Mason, President of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, today announced that the 15th annual John Jay College/Harry Frank Guggenheim awards for Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting have been awarded to Blake Ellis and Melanie Hicken of CNN, and Kyle Hopkins of the Anchorage Daily News.

“We are proud to honor once again the work of journalists who report on our justice system,” said President Mason. “This year’s winners demonstrate the critical role played by the media, locally and nationally, to ensure our justice system lives up to the values that sustain our democracy.”

The prizes, administered by John Jay’s Center on Media, Crime and Justice (CMCJ), recognize the previous year’s best print and online justice reporting in a U.S.-based media outlet between November 2018 and October 2019. Winning entries in each of the two categories share a cash award of $1,500 and a plaque. Runners-up (see below) receive certificates of Honorable Mention.

The 2020 winners:

Blake Ellis and Melanie Hicken, reporting for CNN, share the 2020 John Jay Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting Award (Single-Story Category) for their year-long investigation of the deficiencies in for-profit health care administered in the
nation’s correctional facilities. Focusing on the nation’s largest private contractor of prison health services, they documented how doctors and nurses working for Correct Care Solutions (now Wellpath) repeatedly failed to diagnose and monitor chronic illnesses and life-threatening diseases as part of a pattern of negligence that in some cases led to inmate deaths. Their reporting, supported by court files, public records requests, interviews with over 50 current and former employees, and first-hand accounts from inmates themselves, used powerful videos and photojournalism to tell the story both visually and digitally.

As a result of Ellis’ and Hicken’s reporting, local prison contracts with the healthcare provider came under scrutiny from lawmakers, and attracted national calls for further investigation. “The U.S. government has a moral obligation to respect the dignity of every individual in its care, and that mission is severely compromised when government agencies transfer responsibility to private corporations incentivized to cut costs and turn profits,” California Sen. Kamala Harris said in a statement after the story was posted.

Kyle Hopkins of the Anchorage Daily News won the 2020 John Jay Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting Award (Series Category) for a series of stories revealing how indigenous Alaskans are systematically denied basic public safety services. The series, entitled “Lawless,” produced in partnership with ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network, found that a lack of qualified personnel had forced some Alaska communities to hire officers convicted of felonies, domestic violence and other offenses. Hopkins traveled to remote villages where residents themselves deal with lawbreakers, in some cases restraining active shooters with duct tape. One in three Alaska communities had no local law enforcement of any kind.

The impact of Hopkins’ reporting was “immediate and staggering,” Charles Ornstein, Deputy Managing Editor of ProPublica, said in a letter accompanying the entry. After traveling to Alaska, U.S. Attorney General William Barr declared the state’s lack of rural law enforcement a federal emergency, and the Department of Justice pledged $52 million to provide public safety officers, training and infrastructure in Alaska villages. The U.S. Attorney’s office announced it would hire rural prosecutors; and some communities, such as the Inupiaq village of Stebbins, will receive Alaska Trooper posts for the first time.

A close look at New York gang policing published by The Intercept was Runner-Up in the single-story category. Alice Speri spent three years looking into what was called at the time the “largest gang takedown in New York City history”—which led to 120 indictments in April, 2016. Her reporting raised questions about the work of police and prosecutors in a case most media outlets covered by press release. Her story highlighted “systemic problems” in the justice system, including the reliance by prosecutors on a mass plea-bargaining system that undermined poor defendants’ right to due process. In the process of reporting the story, which was accompanied by a documentary produced by Stephanie Tangkilisan, Alice embedded herself in the Bronx community impacted by the raid. Her reporting was since “cited by a number of groups working to keep police and city officials accountable to the public about their gang policing practices,” said Roger Hodge, Deputy Editor of The Intercept.
A team of journalists at the Greenville News, led by Nathaniel Cary, was named Runner-Up in the series category for a closely reported look at the practice of civil asset forfeiture in South Carolina. The team, which also included Mike Ellis, Anna Lee and photojournalist Josh Morgan, gathered over 3,200 records at county courthouses to produce the first-known statewide database of civil asset forfeiture in the country. Their stories identified significant abuses in a system that allowed authorities to seize $17 million of assets over three years—often from people never convicted or even charged with a crime. As result of their series, “Taken,” the state is now considering legislation to end the practice, and a bipartisan group of U.S. representatives in Congress calling for reform has cited the Greenville News reporting. A state court has since ruled that civil asset forfeiture is unconstitutional. The ruling is being appealed.

The awards will be presented February 20, 2020 at a dinner in New York City, held in conjunction with the 14th annual John Jay/Harry Frank Guggenheim Symposium on Crime in America. The dinner will also honor Dallas Morning News reporter Alfredo Corchado as this year’s “Justice Media Trailblazer,” in recognition of his courageous career-long reporting on Mexican drug cartels operating in the U.S., and more recently his trailblazing coverage of how the immigration crisis has impacted people living in the border region of southwestern U.S. The awards will be presented by John Jay Provost Yi Li, and Zahira Torres, senior editor in ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network. The dinner program will be emcee’d by Errol Louis of NY1.

Reservations can be made here.

**Jurors for the 2020 awards were:**

Alexa Capeloto, Associate Professor, John Jay College; Joe Domanick, Associate Director, Center on Media, Crime and Justice; Ted Gest, President, Criminal Justice Journalists; Ann Givens of The Trace; Katti Gray, contributing editor, The Crime Report; Leslie Lapides, senior editor at the Center for Sustainable Journalism; Mark Obbie, a criminal justice writer and former executive editor of American Lawyer; and Seth Freed Wessler of Type Investigations (winner of the 2019 John Jay Journalism Prize in the Single-Story Category). Wren Longno served as Administrator of this year’s awards.

**H.F. GUGGENHEIM SYMPOSIUM ON CRIME IN AMERICA**

The awards dinner is the cornerstone event of the 15th Annual Harry Frank Guggenheim Symposium on Crime in America at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City February 20-21, 2020.

The symposium, *Is America Ready for Prison Reform?*, will explore the emerging landscape of innovative changes to the culture of prisons and corrections.

Speakers include:

- Leann Bertsch, Director of North Dakota’s Department of Corrections and
Rehabilitation;

- **The Hon. Jim McGreevey**, Co-Chair, New Jersey Reentry Commission;
- **Nick Turner**, President, Vera Institute of Justice;
- **Jhody Polk**, Founder, Florida Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls

A one-time fee of $25 is required for attendance at the on-the-record symposium. For a full list of speakers, please click here. For information on registration, please contact Ricardo Martinez at rmartinez@jjay.cuny.edu

**JOHN JAY/H.F. GUGGENHEIM & QUATTRONE REPORTING FELLOWS**

Twenty-six journalists from print, online and broadcast outlets have also been awarded Reporting Fellowships to attend the 15th annual John Jay/Harry Frank Guggenheim Symposium on Crime in America, including four who have received special investigative fellowships from the Quattrone Center on the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School for projects examining systemic issues in the justice system. These unique fellowships are aimed at encouraging and promoting top-quality journalism on criminal justice. The Fellows were selected from a wide pool of applicants based on editors’ recommendations, and on investigative reporting projects underway or in the planning stage. A full list of the journalism fellows is below.

**The John Jay/Harry Frank Guggenheim Symposium**, administered by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College, is the only national forum that brings together journalists, legislators, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners for candid on-the-record discussions on emerging issues of U.S. criminal justice.

Overall support for the conference and fellowships comes from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. Additional support is provided by the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and others.

**2020 John Jay/H.F. Guggenheim Reporting Fellows**

(in Alphabetical Order)

- **Lawrence Bartley**, *The Marshall Project*
- **Michelle Theriault Boots**, *Anchorage Daily News*
- **Jon Collins**, *Minnesota Public Radio*
- **Molly Crane-Newman**, *NY Daily News*
- **Noelle Crombie**, *Oregonian*
- **Rachel Dissell**, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*
- **Melanie Eversley**, *TheGrio/Fortune*
- **Beth Fertig**, *WNYC*
- **Bethany Freudenthal**, *Las Cruces (NM)*
- **Sun News-USA TODAY Network**
- **Henry Gass**, *Christian Science Monitor*
- **Daniel Gross**, *Greenville News/USA Today*
- **Ashad Hajela**, *Raleigh News & Observer*
- **Sandy Hodson**, *Augusta (GA) Chronicle*
- **Chelsia Rose Marcius**, *NY Daily News*
- **Marsha McLeod**, *The Globe & Mail* (Toronto)
- **Jason Pohl**, *Sacramento Bee*
- **Lauren Poteat**, *National Newspaper Publishers Association*
- **Levi Pulkkinen**, *Crosscut*
Jordan Rubin, Bloomberg Law
Connor Sheets, Al.com/Birmingham News
Dan Sullivan, Tampa Bay Times
Ryan Tarinelli, Associated Press

2020 Quattrone Investigative Reporting Fellows
(in Alphabetical Order)

Michael Barajas, Texas Observer
Justin Fenton, Baltimore Sun
Halley Freger, ABC News
Thomas Peele, Bay Area News Group

About John Jay College of Criminal Justice: An international leader in educating for justice, John Jay College of Criminal Justice of The City University of New York offers a rich liberal arts and professional studies curriculum to upwards of 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 135 nations. In teaching, scholarship and research, the College approaches justice as an applied art and science in service to society and as an ongoing conversation about fundamental human desires for fairness, equality and the rule of law. For more information, visit

The Center on Media, Crime and Justice, established at John Jay College in 2006, is the nation's only practice- and research-oriented think tank devoted to encouraging and developing high-quality reporting on criminal justice. Publisher of The Crime Report, it promotes better-informed public debate on the complex 21st century challenges of law enforcement, public security and justice in a globalized urban society.

The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation is a leader in creating and disseminating knowledge on the nature, consequences, and reduction of violence in its many forms, including war, crime, and human aggression.

The Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School is a national research and policy hub created to catalyze long-term structural improvements to the US criminal justice system.