

To the Judges:

Like everyone else in America, we followed the endless series of tragedies – in Newtown, Tucson, Aurora and on and on – and knew very clearly something was wrong. The system designed to identify, stabilize, treat and reintegrate the mentally ill was failing at nearly every level. What we ultimately discovered in our community, which straddles Washington and Idaho, outraged our readers and prompted concrete reforms, several lawsuits, a contempt finding, freedom for one man and the introduction this month of two new state laws.

Our exhaustive series, dubbed “State of Mind,” took our four staff writers – Jacob Jones, Deanna Pan, Heidi Groover and Daniel Walters – to local jails, psychiatric hospitals, emergency rooms, doctors’ offices, rural communities and state capitals. In the end, we published tens of thousands of words in more than 50 articles in the past year (Feb. 6-Dec. 25).

Among the highlights:

- We uncovered the tragic story of Amanda Cook, a 25-year-old mother held in a county jail after a psychotic episode. Washington state requires that court-mandated evaluations occur within seven days; we found that happens in only 1 percent of cases. Indeed, Amanda Cook spent just under two months waiting in jail before she managed to hang herself in a shower. That reporting prompted a class-action lawsuit and a judge’s contempt finding against the state mental hospitals tasked with competency examinations.
- We also gained access to those state psychiatric hospitals and conducted the first interviews with patients there in more than a decade. We traced how a patient’s escape years ago had locked down the facility permanently; we also revealed that people found not guilty by reason of insanity ended up being held without treatment years longer than if they had simply pleaded guilty. A lawsuit directly inspired by our reporting has already secured the release of one patient found to be neither dangerous nor mentally ill.
- We probed the death of Sheena Henderson, whose husband shot and killed her in a murder-suicide. Before the shooting, her husband had been hospitalized briefly for a mental health evaluation and, upon release, retrieved his guns from police. The next day, he killed Sheena. This month, lawmakers are introducing “Sheena’s Law” to change how police handle suicidal people and notify family when their weapons are released.
- We further explored the role of our local police as first responders to mental health crises and assessed the effectiveness of Crisis Intervention Training at the Spokane Police Department.
- The series culminated in a 20-page Mental Health Resource Guide in which we detailed ways for readers to take active roles in the issue – with practical advice on things like identifying symptoms and helping a stranger in crisis on the street. We also profiled successful people who struggle with mental illness as a way to address lingering stigmas.

Our “State of Mind” series, in the end, has done more than we could have hoped for, and it is our honor to nominate it for AAN Awards.

