

The Baltimore Banner wins its first Pulitzer

The winning series — produced as part of a New York Times local investigations fellowship — explores Baltimore’s fentanyl crisis



The Baltimore Banner headquarters in the city's Inner Harbor on October 17, 2024.
(Angela Fu/Poynter)

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Less than three years after its launch, The Baltimore Banner has won its first Pulitzer Prize, journalism’s highest honor.

The Pulitzer board [announced](#) Monday that Alissa Zhu, Nick Thieme and Jessica Gallagher of the Banner had won the Local Reporting prize for a series they did as part The New York Times’ local investigations fellowship.

The [series](#) explores Baltimore’s fentanyl crisis, finding that the city’s fatal overdose rate has reached unprecedented

levels and that the response from local leaders has stalled and become “disjointed.”

The Prizes lauded the reporters’ “compassionate investigative series that captured the breathtaking dimensions of Baltimore’s fentanyl crisis and its disproportionate impact on older Black men.” It noted that the Banner had created a “sophisticated statistical model” that it shared with other newsrooms.

It is the first time the Banner, a nonprofit digital newsroom, has won a Pulitzer. Launched in June 2022 with \$50 million in pledged funding from Maryland hotel magnate Stewart Bainum Jr., the Banner is the state’s largest news outlet.

To report out the investigation, the Banner journalists interviewed more than 100 health officials. They also sued Maryland’s Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for autopsy reports and reviewed thousands of pages of government records.

“People in Baltimore have been dying of overdoses at a rate never before seen in a major American city,” the investigation’s first part reads. “In the past six years, nearly 6,000 lives have been lost. The death rate from 2018 to 2022 was nearly double that of any other large city, and higher than nearly all of Appalachia during the prescription pill crisis, the Midwest during the height of rural meth labs or New York during the crack epidemic.”

The Banner found that older Black men in their mid-50s to early 70s were hit particularly hard by the crisis, and that the pattern extended beyond Baltimore. As a result, the Banner shared its dataset with nine other newsrooms

across the country so that they could pursue their own versions of the Banner's investigation.

"A deep dive on drug overdoses was one of The Banner's first big story ideas, when our editor Kimi Yoshino recognized that a crisis that was killing thousands in the city had been largely overlooked. We began to dig. We sued to obtain data that had been kept from the public's view and scoured the city for stories from mothers who have buried children, people struggling with addiction and frontline workers fighting to save lives every day," Zhu said in a press release. "As a result, our team is honored to accept the organization's first Pulitzer Prize. We are even more honored to see the information we brought to light is now helping shape new conversations, policies and programs to tackle overdoses in our city and state."

Before the Banner launched, Yoshino spent time talking to Baltimoreans. It was during those conversations that some public health experts suggested the Banner look into the city's overdose numbers.

"As the next couple of months passed, I realized, 'Wow, nobody is talking about this,'" Yoshino said. "There's so much attention on homicides, and at the time, I would say 300 people a year were dying of homicides. But 1,000 people a year were dying of overdoses — not ever mentioned. It was undercovered by media. It was not discussed by city leaders."

Since the Banner published its initial three-part investigation, Maryland has started to crack down on bad actors in the recovery space and allocate some money to address the challenges facing the older Black men who have been disproportionately affected, Yoshino said.

The Times supported the Banner's reporting through its [fellowship program](#) that gives local journalists a chance to produce "significant investigative work" on their region over the course of a year. Zhu, who was an inaugural fellow from 2023 to 2024, received a salary from the Times and guidance from its editors. Former Times executive editor Dean Baquet heads the fellowship.

The investigation also won The Frank A. Blethen Award for Local Accountability Reporting – a [Poynter Journalism Prize](#).

The Banner's growth in the past three years has been explosive. It launched in response to growing concerns over notorious investment firm Alden Global Capital's acquisition of the city's local paper, The Baltimore Sun, in 2021. While many new nonprofit outlets must start small, Bainum's large upfront investment in the Banner has allowed it to hire journalists at a rapid pace and pursue ambitious reporting projects.

Last year, Sinclair Broadcast Group executive chair David Smith, who has been vocal about his support for President Donald Trump, acquired the Sun. That change in ownership, along with right-wing shifts in the Sun's content, has [driven staff and readers to the Banner](#). With an editorial staff of more than 80, the Banner is now larger than the 188-year-old Sun.

The Banner's leaders have previously described the outlet as an "experiment" and potential model for local journalism, which has been in decline for decades. Receiving the Pulitzer on Monday, Yoshino said, shows that the Banner has moved past just being an experiment.

“We are showing how to create a local news organization that can be sustainable. We are actually doing it,” Yoshino said. “I feel like that’s part of what this moment means, that you can build an organization, despite all the headwinds, that can find success.

“It can find journalistic success, it can find success with subscribers and it can have impact that makes a difference in a community.”

The Banner hopes that if it proves the success of its model, communities across the country will be able to replicate it. The organization is currently “on track” to reach financial sustainability, and its revenue in 2024 was up 60% year-over-year, CEO Bob Cohn [told the Banner](#) Monday.

On X, Banner journalists posted [videos](#) and [photos](#) from the newsroom’s celebration. There was applause and tears and champagne. Hearing the Pulitzer board announce the Banner’s win was a “truly joyous moment,” one Yoshino said she will remember forever.

“It just felt like validation for everything that we have been trying to do for the last three years.”