

To the Colorado State Legislature,

My name is Teresa L. Bennis. I'm a former resident of Saguache County, Colorado, and an investigative reporter who worked for Valley Publishing out of Monta Vista and had stories also published in the Valley Courier in Alamosa. I was the reporter for the Center Post-Dispatch in Center, Colorado. I worked for these publications from 2000 to 2003 and again from 2006 to 2020. During that time period, I did nothing but uncover one illegal or unethical thing after the other. and it led me to believe that there was a deep degree of corruption in San Luis Valley counties. I think this is borne out by the victim's advocate scandal several years back and the recent firing of the sheriff and deputies in Costilla County. But that is not the half of it.

The first notable problem in my coverage area, Saguache County, was a glaring lack of transparency in open meetings. The Center Post-Dispatch won a Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) lawsuit sponsored by the papers against the Saguache County Commissioners July 6, 2010. In November 2010, I began coverage of the fraudulent vote count of a county election there which later exploded into further CORA and other lawsuits filed by a private individual, a state grand jury investigation and the recall of the county clerk involved in the election.

The Colorado Open Records Act suit win against the commissioners began a subtle but eventually discernible war against me by commissioners. And not just commissioners, but the courts and the county attorney as well. The judges there were tied into commissioners in a way that defied investigation in a lot of respects. But what I did uncover while working with the papers was that there was election fraud going on during the 2010 county election. That hit the Denver papers in 2011 and 2012, so was well covered. A grand jury was called in to investigate the clerk's involvement in the election and there were lawsuits filed. I never felt like the judges took it as seriously as they should have. And to this day, they deny that there's election fraud going on in any Colorado counties. During the process of investigating the election, I was pushed into a corner by a former commissioner, then a Center town board member, who threatened my life. I was forced to obtain a restraining order against him because of repeated attempts to intimidate me.

There also were problems in several municipal elections in Center, Colorado with election verification and what I would call ballot tampering. In the course of one election, I had reports from people that members or former members of the town council and some of their friends would take ballots around to people's houses and have them signed personally. They used ballots rescued from the town post office for this purpose. And there were enough stories told that I believe there was coercion being used against some of these people, especially people who had relatives there illegally to vote a certain way or their relatives could be in danger of deportation. Most of these residents were too afraid to talk. Some signatures were obviously forged, and a n SoS signature verification team was called in to investigate this. I ran into major pushback every time I tried to get information from town officials on these matters and many pertinent documents were even destroyed. This also went to court and resulted in Center being ordered to call a new election.

Some of the other issues I covered during my reporting career were child custody cases, many of which were not given fair consideration. I reported on several of those. Unfortunately, my own adult children were targeted by some of these county officials in retaliation for my ongoing investigation of corruption in the county. Because of false allegations against him, my son was stripped of any visitation rights with his children, even though he had no prior criminal history

and no charges were ever filed against him. His ex-wife, a convicted felon and drug user, was allowed to take the children to Texas. This was in 2010-2011, at the height of the election fraud investigation. To give those reading this an idea of how many conflicts of interest and due process violations occurred here, I will just say that the sheriff who threatened to have me fired during the election debacle “lost” many of the complaints I had made against the daughter-in-law and failed to investigate others so they could not be used in court. The sheriff’s wife was the head of social services where the false complaints against my son were filed. The Child Family Investigator (CFI) assigned to the case was the attorney for social services at the time. This CFI interviewed the ex-wife’s parents for the report she made but not me and my husband. The counselor in the case was not only counseling my son but three other members of our family, including the ex-wife, a major ethical violation. Ex-parte violations were committed. The judge disobeyed supreme court regulations in allowing the unethical counselor to decide a custody matter, and the decision to deny visitation for my son was based on false information. The four children taken by the ex-wife to Texas were exposed to severe emotional abuse and neglect, including one daughter who was intellectually disabled. This was documented years later. So four lives were ruined because of corrupt officials.

Another instance was the death of my eight-year-old grandson while in the custody of his druggie mother who had abandoned him. This divorce case between my other son and his ex-wife was moved to Park County but the judge there obviously favored the mother, who had longtime family residents in the county. The mother became a meth addict and we tried to warn the judge of the dangers. We begged the courts to have the child tested for drug ingestion — oh no, the mother had to agree to it. We begged the courts to let him testify and tell them what he was telling us; oh no, against the rules. We pleaded with them to reconsider the drug results because the mother was allowed to delay her testing and get clean. My grandson died in the custody of his mother because she was too stoned to properly place him or keep him in his car seat. But she was never tested for drugs after the accident that killed him. Before he died, he was telling us that he was with her when she sold drugs, and was going to places with her and watching her shoot up. One of the places being one of the clinics where they're allowed to go and do this legally. My son lost his only child because of corrupt courts, judges and attorneys.

Trying to presume decent judges exist and can police themselves doesn't work in Colorado. They need oversight. They need to reform county courts and judges. Pass a bill that guarantees this.

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Winner of the CFOIC Jean Otto Friend of Freedom Award (2014) and the Colorado Press Association Service to the First Award