

Post reporters win anti-fraud coalition's award for sober home coverage

By: Sonja Isger

The Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, a Washington-based policy and research group, awarded its inaugural journalism award for fraud reporting to The Palm Beach Post for its work on fraud in the sober-home industry.

Post investigative reporters Pat Beall and Christine Stapleton accepted the award Tuesday at the coalition's annual meeting in Washington. The coalition praised The Post's "richly imbued and often tragic coverage of sober homes, with insurance money as the scam bait."

The coalition's membership is a cross-section of business, consumer and government interests, with membership ranging from the FBI to Blue Cross Blue Shield and the National Urban League.

The award honored Post coverage dating to 2015, when Stapleton and Beall first wrote about how sober-home operators were bilking insurers of millions of dollars for urine drug tests.

Corner drug stores sell \$25 tests that immediately will indicate the presence of a wide array of drugs.

But Palm Beach County treatment centers and affiliated labs were charging as much as \$2,000 for a much more sophisticated test. Sober homes were requiring residents be tested every day, creating multimillion-dollar business empires.

In congressional testimony Tuesday on sober home fraud and patient abuse, Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg said insurers no longer were paying thousands per test, but were still willing to pay about \$200 each — leaving plenty of room, he noted, for fraud.

A team of Post reporters and editors, including Stapleton, Beall, Lawrence Mower, Joe Capozzi, John Pacenti, Barbara Marshall

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Coalition Against Insurance Fraud

and Mike Stucka produced "Heroin: Killer of a Generation" in 2016. The 12-page special section told the stories of the 216 men, women and teenagers who died in Palm Beach County in 2015 of a heroin-related overdose. One in 10 had died in a sober home.

The Post's reporting played a role in the 27-year prison sentence handed down to sober-home operator Kenneth Chatman, the subject of a Post profile by Mower in December 2015; and this year's arrest of Eric Snyder, the subject of a 2016 profile by Stapleton.

The coalition's Fraud Prosecutor of the Year Award went to Orange County, Calif., Deputy District Attorney Shaddi Kamiabipour. Also honored was Howard Goldblatt, the coalition's long-time director of government affairs.