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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Washington Coalition for Open Government announces awards

The Washington Coalition for Open Government will honor retired King County Superior Court Judge William Downing, watchdog journalist Eli Sanders of *The Stranger* and longtime WCOG executive director Elly Snow Walker as the 2019 recipients of the Coalition's highest awards, to be presented in September.

Judge Downing, a current member of the Washington Public Disclosure Commission, will receive the James Madison Award for his long-term commitment to the cause of open government. Downing served as chair of the Bench-Bar-Press Liaison Committee for more than 16 years, mediating numerous disputes that balanced interests involving access to public records.

Walker, who for many years owned Seattle Operating Support LLC, is recognized for her care of the Coalition above and beyond its role as her client by receiving the James Andersen Award, given for advancing the efforts of WCOG. Anderson, a former chief justice of the Washington State Supreme Court, was a founding board member of the Coalition.

Sanders is receiving the Kenneth F. Bunting Award for his investigation into online campaign ads in light of Washington state's regulations and disclosure laws. One result of his reporting of dozens of stories in *The Stranger* was lawsuits against Facebook and Google by the state Attorney General, and a \$425,000 settlement for

the companies' failure to follow Washington access laws – and their decision to stop selling political ads in the state because of its tough disclosure rules.

As the longtime chair of the Bench-Bar-Press Liaison Committee, nicknamed the “Fire Brigade,” Downing worked to avoid confrontations and polarized positions among all parties in regard to judicial access issues.

“It is safe to say his work involved virtually every news organization in the state and courts in every county,” said Mike Fancher, former executive editor of *The Seattle Times*, a WCOG board member and the 2018 recipient of the Andersen Award. Downing dealt with issues of cameras in the courtroom, access and opening sealed records, and the Fire Brigade frequently offered educational seminars and training.

WCOG President Toby Nixon saluted Walker's many years of contributions to the Coalition. She and her husband and business partner, Jim Walker, frequently would forgo compensation to enable the coalition to do its work.

“We're grateful for Elly's many years of dedicated service to the Coalition as our executive director,” Nixon said. “Elly and Jim and all the staff at Seattle Operating Support provided consistent excellent service that went far beyond expectations.”

Sanders, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, continues to report on tech firms' efforts to work around Washington's access laws. He exposed Facebook's claims that it is exempt from Washington law and the companies' lobbying efforts to change state transparency regulations. The Bunting Award is named in honor of the late Kenneth F. Bunting, former *Seattle P-I* editor, who was also executive director of the National Freedom of Information Coalition.

“Eli Sanders and The Stranger performed a public service by exposing how tech giants Facebook and Google flouted Washington state's transparency laws and failed to live up to their own promises,” said George Erb, former editor of the *Puget Sound Business Journal*, a WCOG board member and 2015 Andersen Award recipient. “Sanders' work was watchdog journalism at its best.”

WCOG also named six runners-up who will be honored at the Madison-Andersen-Bunting event as well. They are:

- *The Tri-City Herald*, for its regular use of Washington's Public Records Act in its investigations, notably including 911 dispatch logs that gave insight into an unusual murder and into detective work in another case, as well as broadening coverage of a suicide threat by a Superior Court judge into a study of isolation and stress on the bench;
- *The Daily Evergreen*, the student newspaper of Washington State University, which relied heavily on the PRA to expose sexual harassment complaints against former

Rose Bowl quarterback Jason Gessler;

- Will Rubin, reporter for *The Chronicle* in Centralia, for his effective use of the PRA and investigative reporting to expose mismanagement of public funds and lax background checks of a new manager of the local public transit district;
- Austin Jenkins of Northwest News Network and Jim Brunner, of *The Seattle Times*, who teamed on an examination of Gov. Jay Inslee's out-of-state travels for political activity, relying heavily on PRA requests involving State Patrol costs, schedules and other issues.
- Alyssa Evans and Natalie St. John of the *Chinook Observer* in Long Beach, who challenged the Astoria, Oregon police who withheld records about an incident involving Klan-recruitment efforts;
- The staff of *The Yakima Herald* who reported aggressively on issues of secrecy, mismanagement and corruption in Wapato city government, which has drawn the interest of both the Washington state Auditor and the State Attorney General, as well as the Yakima County Prosecutor.

The Madison/Andersen/Bunting Awards Breakfast will take place Sept. 20, 2019 at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle. Presale tickets will be available shortly.

WCOG was founded in 2002 by a group of individuals representing organizations with a broad spectrum of opinions and interests but all dedicated to the principles of strengthening the state's open government laws and protecting the public's access to government at all levels. WCOG stands for the principle that transparency and public participation are essential building blocks of good government.