

Work the System: Understanding the subtleties

Figure out how the justice system works. Know what happens from the time a police officer turns on his or her siren to the time a person is sentenced. And don't disregard other agencies within the justice system. Study how the legal system works. Know how to track a case through the courts.

Follow the paper trail. "There's the police, there's the courts, there's the morgue, there's the fire marshals... and they all have to cooperate together," the Free Press' Kresnak said. "And because [there's] this paper that passes between them, this passing of the paper gives an opportunity to find out what's going on."

Meet the clerks. Get to know not only the high-ranking officials, spokespeople and detectives, but also the secretaries, administrative assistants, clerks and interns who work in government offices. Stop by their offices when you're not working on a story. Get to know them. Be polite and friendly. You never know what you might learn. "Get to know the clerks, get to know the lawyers, get to know the prosecutors, the various entities of the system," Kresnak said. "When you find out something you shouldn't have, there's always various entities to blame each other."

Know the hierarchy. Understand how news travels as a story unfolds. "When something big happens, there's kind of a chain of notification," said David Heinzmann, of the Chicago Tribune. "If you have some people who talk to you in that chain of command, then you can keep tabs on what's really going on when there's an important story developing. The key is finding those people, getting them to talk to you and not getting them in trouble."