

CALMATTERS

2026 IMPACT REPORT

Loren Chow speaks with CalMatters reporter Robert Lewis about the accident that killed his wife, Jenny.

PHOTO BY ANNA HOCH-KENNEY

OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

This year we inspired more change in California than ever before. Thanks to our supporters, we're building a better, more informed California, together. Here are a few highlights from 2026:

- Following CalMatters' reporting, 26 new bills were introduced in the state legislature, with 24 citing CalMatters as direct inspiration. Ten were signed into law.
- Through our comprehensive Voter Guide, we educated millions of voters on the candidates and propositions up and down the ballot, giving them the information they needed to make informed voting decisions.
- We won the Trust in American Institutions Challenge, giving us the resources to expand Digital Democracy and bring greater transparency in government to more states.
- Inspired by the success of our 2026 Ideas Festival in Sacramento, we're expanding to Los Angeles and San Francisco in 2027, bringing inspiring speakers and bold ideas to a broader audience.

In the coming year, you'll read more investigative reporting, see more short-form video and documentaries, and learn more about challenges California continues to grapple with, including special education, property insurance, and the persistent homelessness crisis.

Our mission remains the same: to help Californians understand their state and make government more transparent, accountable, and responsive. Thank you for making this work possible. A better California is attainable when we work toward it together.

Neil Chase, CEO

Hema Sareen Mohan, Board Chair

2026 SNAPSHOT



8,057
Supporting members



76
Legislative mentions



75
VotingMatters events



11 years
California reporting



327,000
Active newsletter subscribers



$16,500,000
2026 budget

YOUR SAFETY

Our investigation into dangerous drivers being allowed to stay on the road spurred 17 bills in California's biggest DUI crackdown in 20 years. 4 bills became law.

Our "License to Kill" series exposed how the California DMV has been unable — or unwilling — to get dangerous drivers off the road before it was too late. Many kept driving recklessly after killing someone. Some even killed again.

A bipartisan coalition of state lawmakers responded with the biggest legislative effort to address dangerous driving in a generation. Many of the 17 bills directly addressed issues CalMatters uncovered, but most failed, with groups arguing that increasing enforcement and penalties disproportionately harms low-income and historically marginalized people, and are not the best ways to make roads safer.



CalMatters reporters Lauren Hepler and Robert Lewis work during the production of a documentary on semi-truck-related traffic fatalities. Photo by Kevin Clancy, Evident Media and CalMatters

Four bills became law, including measures that make it easier to charge repeat drunk drivers with a felony and, if they kill someone, with murder. While some bills were pared back during the legislative process, the new laws notably increase potential penalties for repeat DUI offenders.

Our investigation isn't over. In October, we found that after licensed truck drivers killed people with their big rigs, California let them keep driving. After our reporters asked the DMV about these cases, the agency took action against a dozen commercial drivers by suspending licenses or stripping commercial driving privileges.

PROTECTING NEIGHBORHOODS FROM CHEMICAL DANGERS

A new law aims to fill a regulatory gap, after lawmakers saw CalMatters' coverage of a chemical storage tank that almost exploded in Orange County over the Memorial Day weekend. Our reporters found that despite the risks, facilities storing the chemical were not required by law to have an emergency plan.

FUNDING SCHOOLS AND ROADS IN RURAL CALIFORNIA

After CalMatters relentlessly chronicled the impact of millions of dollars being cut from rural schools and communities, Congress restored $471 million in funding for schools, roads, fire prevention, public safety and other critical needs. In California, 39 counties will share more than $40 million.

KEEPING FAMILIES IN THE LOOP

A CalMatters investigation of CARE Court found the program has reached far fewer people than Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration initially anticipated. Following our reporting, the state passed two new laws to help CARE Court better connect Californians with mental health care.

YOUR RIGHTS

California's poorest went to trial with the odds stacked against them. Legislators passed new laws to change that.

A CalMatters' investigation found that public defender offices statewide lack the investigators who are often the greatest protection against wrongful convictions. We also found that defense attorneys in several rural counties had astronomical caseloads and were less likely to challenge the prosecutors' evidence and take cases to trial.

Lawyers have a constitutional obligation to investigate every case. But CalMatters found that poor people accused of crimes, who account for at least 80% of criminal defendants, are routinely convicted in California without anyone investigating the charges against them.



Sheriff Eric Taylor stands next to his awards and mementos at the San Benito County Sheriff's Office in Hollister. Photo by Estefany Gonzalez for CalMatters

In response, legislators passed two new laws to limit counties' use of low-pay contracts with private attorneys, mandating funding for defense investigations and requiring reporting on attorney caseloads and other critical data.

PROTECTING CALIFORNIANS' PRIVACY RIGHTS

After a CalMatters investigation found that 35 companies were hiding their data opt-out forms from consumers, 12 companies quickly stopped and made their forms visible to search engines like Google. The reporting also spurred a congressional investigation. Every company was registered in California under the state's Consumer Privacy Act, which allows Californians to request that their information be removed, that it not be sold or that they get access to it.

PROTECTING ELDERS FROM FIDUCIARY ABUSE

Over six years, a fiduciary in Ventura County directed $2.7 million of her elderly clients' money to her husband's law firm and health care company, all with court approval. After CalMatters exposed the conflict of interest, a newly appointed judge began to stop and unwind the arrangements.

PROTECTING WORKERS' TIPS, RENTERS FROM DISCRIMINATION AND MORE

The Markup, part of CalMatters, along with The City Reporter uncovered that a New York City AI chatbot was giving bad advice to business owners, telling them they can do illegal things like taking workers' tips and discriminating against tenants. In direct response, Mayor Zohran Mamdani killed the chatbot.

YOUR ACCESS

Digital Democracy gives voters power over their state government in California, and soon, across the nation.

CalMatters' Digital Democracy won The Trust in American Institutions Challenge, a national call for a bold solution to restore public trust in the core institutions of our society. Philanthropist Reid Hoffman and Lever for Change are providing $1.8 million per year, for five years, to fuel the rapid expansion of Digital Democracy across the country with local partners.

CalMatters' new, personalized My Legislator newsletter takes a massive amount of information on 120 state legislators and turns it into a custom, easy-to-understand, weekly report for every Californian. Built on data from Digital Democracy, the newsletter tells readers what their representatives did that week — every bill introduced, every vote cast and more.



Lobbyists and visitors talk in the rotunda of the state Capitol in Sacramento. Photo by Fred Greaves for CalMatters

Readers have repeatedly told us the newsletter has spurred them to contact their representatives and be more civically informed and involved.

SHINING A LIGHT INSIDE DETENTION CENTERS

Legislators passed a new law that will require local agencies to publicly disclose audio recordings and written records of 911 calls originating from privately run immigration detention facilities. The law was prompted by CalMatters reporting on alleged sexual assaults at the Otay Mesa Detention Center.

SHOWING WHO'S TRACKING YOU ON TIKTOK AND X

Our web privacy inspector tool, Blacklight, now also checks whether TikTok and X are tracking you across the internet. Since 2020, readers have used Blacklight a staggering 18.8 million times, and the tool has been used by several news organizations to find stories that have changed laws and identified privacy violations by companies and governments around the world.

YOUR TAX DOLLARS AND COLLEGE ATHLETES

CalMatters sued UCLA and UC-Berkeley after nearly a year of attempts to obtain information about how the universities pay student athletes. The lawsuit says taxpayers are entitled to know which players in which sports have received money because the programs are state-funded.

YOUR VOICE

Voters got a guide they could trust, in the formats they wanted.

For the past several elections, CalMatters has informed at least 1 in 5 California voters. In 2026, we went further.

A guide built for overwhelmed voters: From a primary with 61 candidates for governor and newly drawn House districts to a general election with 14 propositions and a maze of local races, voters needed a trusted source for information. We guided them through it all.

California's first-ever statewide ballot lookup tool: Our new tool, My Ballot, included nearly every single state and local race and measure. Our fact checking process even helped multiple counties fix errors on their own election maps



An attendee looks through a 2026 Voter Guide zine at a CalMatters VotingMatters event. Photo by Alexandra Hootnick for CalMatters

Easy-to-understand quizzes and candidate videos: Video interviews with governor candidates covered issues from affordability to artificial intelligence, while quizzes about candidates and propositions helped voters make up their minds.

Zines you could hold: Free zines for people who prefer paper or don't go online. The Los Angeles Public Library handed out over 2,000 copies at their voting center branches. CalMatters members helped distribute these across the state, including a retirement community in Santa Maria, a bookstore in Oakland, amongst neighbors in Fresno and through community outreach in Eureka.

VotingMatters events: We hosted 75 live events this year, bringing together 3,000+ Californians for civil, in-person conversations about the choices on the ballot.

Reaching more Californians with creator partners: Ten online creators made vertical videos about our voter guide for younger voters. Many included personal connections to why voting matters to them: from what it means to be Asian American, to California recognizing Eid as an official holiday, to pride in becoming an American citizen.

BRINGING BIG IDEAS TO MORE OF CALIFORNIA

In May, CalMatters hosted its 2026 Ideas Festival in Sacramento, bringing hundreds of engaged Californians together for a day of conversation about the state's toughest challenges and the ideas that could solve them. Attendees heard from featured speakers including Janet Napolitano, Julián Castro, Lanhee Chen, and Dan Walters, played The Possibility Zone, an interactive government simulation game, and made new connections. The response showed us there's real hunger for these conversations beyond the Capitol. **In 2027, the festival grows to three cities: Los Angeles on March 10, our Sacramento flagship on May 6, and San Francisco on October 5**. This sponsor-funded event is a great way to support CalMatters.


Former DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano and Attorney General Rob Bonta speak with Editor-in-Chief Kristen Go during the 2026 Ideas Festival. Photo by Fred Greaves for CalMatters.

CALMATTERS AWARDS

GOLDEN STATE JOURNALISM AWARDS, SACRAMENTO PRESS CLUB

Four First Place Awards, including Impact in Journalism. Sergio Olmos was honored for Courage in Journalism.

ONLINE JOURNALISM AWARDS

Three First Place, including Immigration Reporting and Accountability Reporting.

BEST OF THE WEST

First Place, Immigration and Border Reporting

POYNTER JOURNALISM PRIZES

Frank A. Blethen Award for Local Accountability Reporting

COLLIER PRIZE FOR STATE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Winner for License to Kill

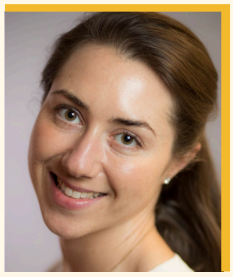
NEWS AND DOCUMENTARY EMMY AWARDS

Outstanding Editing: News for Operation Return to Sender

DONOR SPOTLIGHTS

"As a former Washington reporter covering outside influence, I know many reporters hope their work helps democratize power. Few have a platform or team like CalMatters. I support CalMatters because it produces news not for the credit, but so that Californians actually get it."

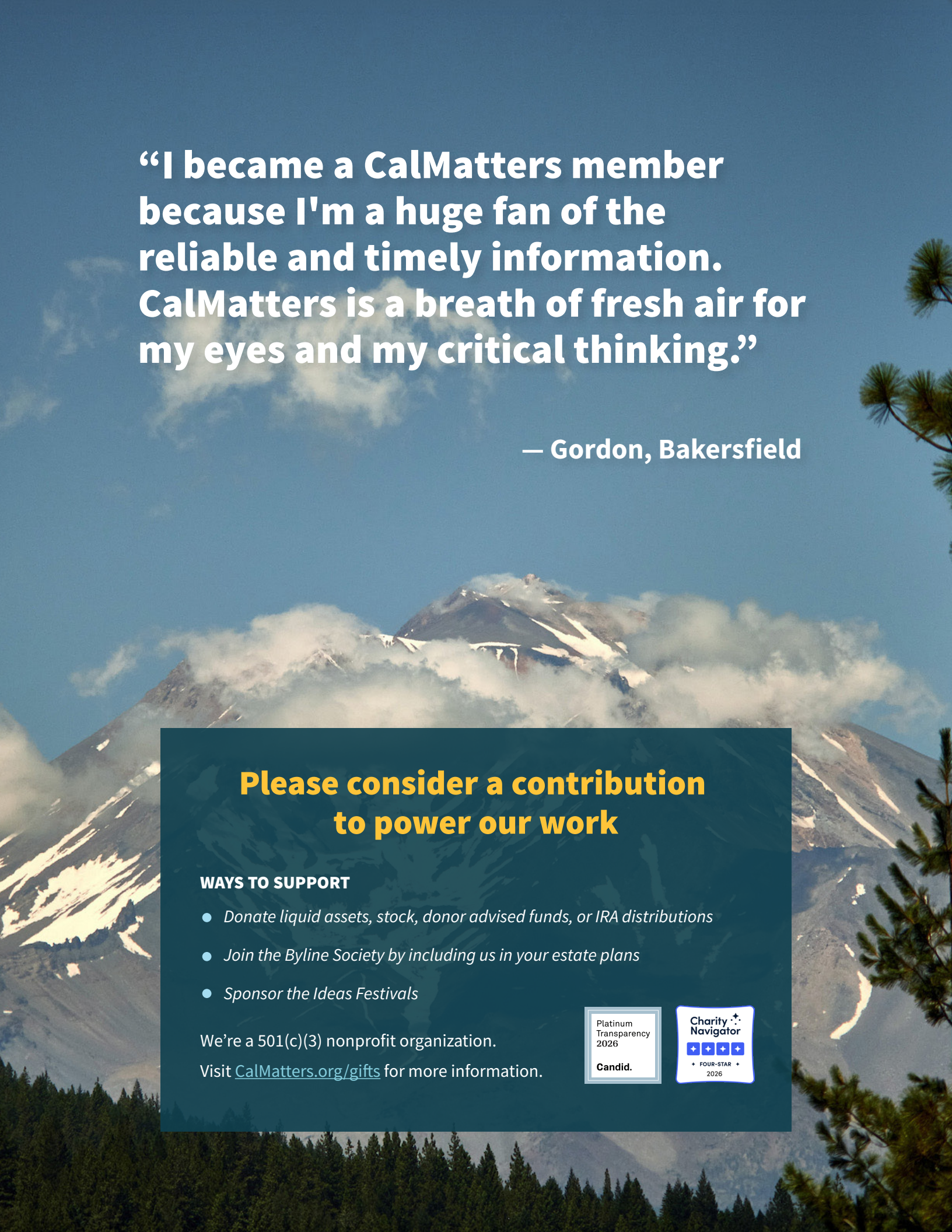
Janie Lorber, Trustee and Executive Director, Lorber Foundation





"Having worked as a journalist early in my career, I know firsthand how important independent journalism is to a healthy democracy. Supporting CalMatters is our way of investing in transparency, accountability, and California's future."

Elyssa Elbaz, Manager, Elbaz Family Foundation



“I became a CalMatters member because I'm a huge fan of the reliable and timely information. CalMatters is a breath of fresh air for my eyes and my critical thinking.”

— Gordon, Bakersfield

Please consider a contribution to power our work

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- *Donate liquid assets, stock, donor advised funds, or IRA distributions*
- *Join the Byline Society by including us in your estate plans*
- *Sponsor the Ideas Festivals*

We’re a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Visit CalMatters.org/gifts for more information.

Platinum Transparency 2026 Candid.

Charity Navigator FOUR-STAR 2026