



# CHANGING LAWS THROUGH SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

The news tells people what's wrong. Solutions journalism – showing readers the story of how public policy affects individuals, a solution to remedy that suffering and the tools to take effective action – fixes what's wrong.

Nowhere was that more evident than in the efforts to build bipartisan support for criminal-justice reform in Illinois. Think Freely Media implemented a solutions journalism program that allowed the Illinois Policy Institute to effectively message the need for reform to a center-right audience, while expanding their outreach in the black community – culminating in a major policy victory.

Lisa Creason was a single mom on a mission: become a registered nurse, get off government assistance and forge a brighter future for herself and her family. In 2017, the Decatur, Illinois, native finally saw her dream come true. Lisa's new nursing license doubled her hourly wage overnight. How? Policy reform championed by Think Freely Media.



Despite working as a certified nursing assistant for nearly a decade and passing her nursing courses with flying colors, the state of Illinois denied Lisa access to the final test she needed to get her license to become a registered

**PARTNER NAME:** Illinois Policy

**LOCATION:** Chicago

**GOAL:** Rebrand ex-offenders in Illinois through solutions journalism.

**RESULTS:** Passed occupational licensing reform into law that lifted a lifetime ban on certain ex-offenders from working in the health care field, allowing thousands of Illinoisans the opportunity to provide a better life for their families.

**STRATEGY:** Think Freely Media was the first group to implement a solutions journalism program at a state-based think tank. Telling the story of single mom in Decatur affected by Illinois' criminal-justice system led to a change in state law, national media attention, coveted awards and a doubling of the Illinois Policy Institute's black community members from 5 percent to 10 percent of their active community.

nurse – all because of a crime she committed as a teenager. More than two decades prior, she tried to steal money from a sandwich shop in a moment of desperation to provide for her baby girl.

But that crime continued to haunt a woman who by all accounts had transformed her life.

Think Freely Media produced a documentary-style video, a photojournalism story and newspaper op-eds detailing Lisa's fight. This content netted five nominations for Lisagor awards, Illinois' top honor in journalism: Best Short Film Documentary, Best News Column or Commentary, Best Multimedia Feature Presentation, Best Individual Blog Post and Best Individual Blog. The Institute took home two Lisagor wins for the photojournalism pieces on Lisa.

During the social media campaign to tell Lisa's story in support of occupational licensing

reform, the Illinois Policy Institute's black community members doubled to 10 percent of their active community from 5 percent.

Lisa's struggle took the form of Senate Bill 42. The bill would allow those with forcible felonies on their records (other than sexual offenses) to seek waivers from the state to obtain health care worker licenses, provided the convictions occurred more than five years prior to applying for a waiver.

In 2016, the General Assembly passed Lisa's bill, with Gov. Bruce Rauner signing it into law alongside Creason, as well as Director of Content Strategy Austin Berg. Think Freely Media ensured this victory was reported across the state in local media, including the [Chicago Sun-Times](#), as well as national outlets such as the [Washington Post](#). SB 42 took effect Jan. 1, 2017.

Finally free to take her nursing exam, Lisa passed. She was elated. Before her first day on the job, she sent a simple text to one of our writers:

**“WITHOUT YOU GUYS, I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN PUTTING ON MY NURSING UNIFORM TODAY.”**

That's the power of solutions journalism.

