

KHI News Service is a leader in nonprofit health journalism

By 2006, Jim McLean was seriously worried about the news business where he'd spent most of his career.

"It was pretty obvious to me that newsrooms were shrinking, and with that, their commitment to public journalism," said McLean, who was a managing editor at The Topeka Capital-Journal before joining KHI in 2005 as vice president for public affairs.

McLean's solution was for the Kansas Health Institute to start its own online news service. Since launching six years ago, KHI News Service has provided in-depth coverage of health issues and the public policy debates surrounding them.

Joining McLean on the KHI News Service staff are Mike Shields, a former city editor at the Lawrence Journal-World; Dave Ranney, a former reporter for The Wichita Eagle; and Phil Cauthon, who's worked for the Houston Chronicle as well as publications in Topeka and Lawrence.

"People used to joke, 'you guys now have the best newsroom in the state,'" McLean said.

One thing's for sure: KHI is often the only news organization represented in the legislative subcommittee meetings and other venues where public policy on health issues is formed.

"It really provides a service that no one else has the expertise to do,"



Jim McLean, with KHI News Service, in action

Susan Lynn, editor and publisher of The Iola Register, said. "You know this KanCare story? I run all their stories on that, and everything they've done on Medicaid, health insurance, all those things."

McLean said one goal of the KHI News Service is to increase the volume and quality of health issues coverage. Another is to raise the visibility of KHI itself. But he is adamant that KHI News Service is run independently of the institute.

"Certainly they've written some stories that have generated heat out in the state," Dr. Robert St. Peter, president and CEO of KHI, said. He goes so far as to say that a series of stories the news service published in 2010 on then-gubernatorial candidate Sam Brownback "crossed the line," in his opinion.

But St. Peter said he's never tried to block a story.

Kaiser Health News and several Kansas newspapers, radio and TV stations run the news service's free reports verbatim. Journalists at other Kansas news outlets rely on KHI to inform their reporting and their editorials.

"We think that's a success as well," McLean said.

The other key audience is policy makers.

"They shed light on issues that wouldn't get a lot of reporting otherwise," said Shannon Cotsoradis, who heads Kansas Action for Children, an advocacy group. For example, she said, "when the governor proposed



Dave Ranney, KHI News Service staff writer

eliminating Kansas Head Start, that was a story they broke and covered in depth during the course of the (legislative) session. They really put a face on the impact of that proposed policy change."

McLean said the news service plans to move to a different floor in the KHI building, further emphasizing its independence. And he's open to suggestions from Lynn and others that the news service more aggressively market itself to media outlets.

"We're about ready to head down that road," McLean said.