

HBOmax™

HBO Documentary Films Presents
A New York Times Production
A Multitude Films Production
A Film by Geeta Gandbhir and Samantha Knowles

HOW WE GET FREE



Running Time: 32 Minutes

Press Contact:

Sweta Vohra, Multitude Films

E: sweta@multitudefilms.com C: 512.527.4096

LOGLINE

Over the course of two years, HOW WE GET FREE follows Elisabeth Epps as she works to abolish cash bail in Colorado.

SYNOPSIS:

Inspired by a New York Times [article](#), HOW WE GET FREE follows the intrepid Elisabeth Epps over the course of two years as she works to abolish cash bail in Colorado and put an end to the criminalization of poverty. Epps is the founder and leader of the Colorado Freedom Fund, one of nearly 100 community bail funds around the country that help incarcerated people who can't afford their bail before trial. For Epps, this work is personal – she spent time in jail herself, bearing witness to the conditions she is so desperate to change.

The film opens in the fall of 2020 as she drives around Denver with thousands of dollars of cashiers checks in hand, bailing people out of jail, and sparring with the local Sheriff about the future of policing. After years of grassroots activism, and on the heels of the 2020 racial reckoning, Epps confronts a new challenge: calls from her community to run for State Representative.

JOINT DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS:

When we first read Nick Kulish's June 2020 community bails funds story in *The New York Times*, Colorado Freedom Fund founder Elisabeth Epps leapt off the page. We could feel her energy and her power in just a few lines:

She made the 30-mile trip to sit in the reception area at the Boulder jail — or, as she called it, the “Boulder County cage” — to bail out three men she had never met. “I’m here to pay ransom,” Ms. Epps told her followers as she livestreamed herself on Twitter.

— Bail Funds, Flush With Cash, Learn to ‘Grind Through This Horrible Process’ by
Nicholas Kulish

This feeling only deepened when we faceted Elisabeth and witnessed her deep passion for the work of freeing people and her commitment to educate others about the injustice of cash bail. It was also clear to us that cash bail was only the tip of the iceberg; Elisabeth saw the end of it as a step towards creating a world that did not rely on prisons or police.

As documentary filmmakers, we often grapple with covering issues around our criminal justice system — a system that is so complicated and large and isn't always easy to capture on screen.

So our films look at *movements*, and we aim to do it in a way that puts the **people first**. In our work, we've followed leaders of the Black and Missing Foundation (HBO's *BLACK AND MISSING*) and documented the stories of SNCC activists with local organizers (*LOWNDES COUNTY AND THE ROAD TO BLACK POWER*). To us, Elisabeth embodied a movement that resonated acutely at the time we met her — the stark racial disparities of the pandemic and policing in the summer of 2020 made her story and activism feel urgent and connected to the broader conversations we were having nationally.

HOW WE GET FREE is first and foremost a personal story — an intimate portrait of a deeply dedicated abolitionist over the course of two formative years *through* which we examine the byzantine cash bail system.



Director Sam Knowles and Elisabeth Epps

She was a vehicle for us to learn about the cash bail system; it is one of the most complex and bureaucratic legal systems, and that's why it is so hard to eradicate. People who have not been convicted of any crime and who sit in jail pretrial comprise the majority of people in jail. And they are then further entrenched into cycles of poverty and incarceration. How is this justice? Through Elisabeth's story, and the people she allows us to meet, we hope the audience will feel just how convoluted and abusive the system is — and make us all think about what it will take *from us* to dismantle it.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:

Elisabeth Epps

Elisabeth Epps is the founder and executive director of the Colorado Freedom Fund and is a member of the Colorado House of Representatives for Denver's House District 6.

Elisabeth's journey to political office traces back more than a decade. She moved out to Colorado in 2011 after getting her law degree at the University of Virginia. She didn't wait to attend graduation in Charlottesville before departing for a job at the Colorado public defender's office. Over the years, she saw firsthand how cash bail impacted the community. Many people couldn't afford bail (even seemingly small fees of \$5 or \$10), were forced to take plea deals, or plead guilty to avoid jail time. As someone who had faced housing and financial instability in her own life, including with a young son, Elisabeth knew what a few days in jail could mean for someone's livelihood.

Elisabeth went on to work for various progressive causes, including as a legislative aide in the U.S. Senate, a field organizer for the Colorado Democratic Party working to re-elect President Barack Obama in 2012, and an organizer for the ACLU of Colorado.

In 2018, Elisabeth decided to work on a Mama's Day Bailout, an annual effort to secure the release of as many black mothers in pre-trial detention on Mother's Day as possible. The action was hugely successful, raising more than \$20,000 with over 400 supporters. She decided to try her hand at keeping the fund running year-round, starting what became known as the Colorado Freedom Fund. The Fund is a nonprofit organization that uses donor money to secure the release of individuals who are awaiting trial behind bars because they cannot afford their bail. In 2020, with the swell of Black Lives Matter protests, the Fund received over \$1 million in donations, 10 times more than the group had received in the previous two years combined.

Elisabeth is a self-proclaimed abolitionist. And in the language of today's abolitionists, bail is "ransom" and jail is known as "the cage." The goal of bail funds, many organizers say, is not just to become a nonprofit version of bail bondsmen, but to upend the system through protest, advocacy and legislation. Elisabeth has helped spearhead litigation to bring an end to bail and fees for misdemeanors in Colorado. She is a visible leader at local protests and gained even further regard when she and 11 other protestors won \$14 million in a lawsuit against the city and county of Denver over police misconduct during the city's 2020 racial justice protests.

This work is personal to Elisabeth. She spent time in jail in 2019 after being arrested and convicted for "obstructing a peace officer" while trying to assist someone who was having a mental health crisis. During her two weeks in detention, her commitment to her work only

deepened. “Not one woman in my unit needed to be there,” Elisabeth told the New York Times reporter Nick Kulish. “The community was not safer with any of those women spending nights in jail.”

Inspired by Elisabeth’s activism and character, her community called on her to run for office to continue her work inside the statehouse. She entered the Democratic primary race for Colorado House District 6 in late 2021, which became one of the most closely watched and expensive primary campaigns in the state, with almost half a million dollars spent by outside donors. In November 2022, she ultimately won with 53 percent of the votes and was officially sworn in on January 9, 2023. Throughout her campaign and now as an elected official, Elisabeth has been clear on her goal: eliminating cash bail in Colorado.

Sheriff Elias Diggins

Elias Diggins was appointed Sheriff of Denver County in July 2020. He has been with the Denver County Sheriff’s department since 1994. He supports the bail fund movement, and the efforts of Elisabeth and the Colorado Freedom Fund. He believes that jails and prisons are necessary at times to help maintain the community’s safety. But he also recognizes the flaws of the bail system and prefers to agitate for change within the system.

Bail Funds and The Colorado Freedom Fund

Bail funds have a long and rich history. Some scholars trace their roots to black communities’ pooling money to buy the freedom of enslaved people. Civil rights groups also collected funds to prepare for arrests that follow protests and acts of civil disobedience. But the modern push for bail funds gained momentum with the start of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013.

The Colorado Freedom Fund is part of the National Bail Fund Network, a collection of roughly 100 different bail funds in the country. The Colorado Freedom Fund is a nonprofit organization started by Elisabeth Epps, based in Denver, Colorado. It is a revolving bail fund, meaning it takes in donations to post bail for people who are too poor to afford it, and, once their case is resolved, the money is returned and the fund posts bail for the next person. The Colorado Freedom Fund, like the others, sees the fund as a temporary intervention to reduce harm in the criminal justice system and works toward a more permanent end to the cash bail system.

What is Cash Bail?

Cash bail is as old as the United States — Alexis de Tocqueville criticized the practice in his 1835 opus *Democracy in America* as “hostile to the poor and favorable only to the rich.” The U.S. is one of the only countries in the world to have a cash bail system.

Cash bail was originally designed as a way to guarantee that people would return to court for trial. Once they show up for court and the case is resolved, the money is returned. If a person cannot afford bail, they wait in jail pre-trial for an undetermined amount of time. On any given day, 350,000 people who have yet to be convicted of any crime are in jail in the U.S. because they can't afford bail before their trial.

This period of time spent in jail can result in the loss of a job, home, access to vital healthcare, and take a toll on one's mental health. Cash bail policies most significantly impact poor people and people of color. An [analysis of academic studies](#) by the Prison Policy Initiative in 2019 shows that Black and brown defendants are at least 10-25% more likely than white defendants to be detained pretrial or to have to pay money bail.

Lawmakers in at least a dozen U.S. states have either eliminated cash bail, implemented reforms, or are seeking to rectify their bail system. Despite focused coverage on crime rates and bail, predominantly pushed by conservative lawmakers, there is no clear evidence that shows bail reform has any significant impact on crime.

ABOUT THE TEAM:

GEETA GANDBHIR (Director) is an award-winning director, producer and editor. As director, she won Best Documentary at the News and Doc Emmys for *I AM EVIDENCE*, an HBO Documentary Film, and Best Government and Politics Documentary for *ARMED WITH FAITH*.. As editor, she won a Primetime Emmy for Best Editing for Spike Lee's HBO documentary series *WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE* and also for the HBO film *BY THE PEOPLE, THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA*. A documentary film she co-produced, *THE SENTENCE*, for HBO, also won a Special Jury Primetime Emmy. In 2019 she directed the series *WHY WE HATE* with Amblin Entertainment and Jigsaw Productions for Discovery. Other award- winning feature docs she co-directed include *PRISON DOGS* which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and *A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES: PEACEKEEPERS* which premiered at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.. She created and is co-directing and co-producing a series on race with The New York Times Op-Docs titled *The Conversation* which won the AFI Documentary Film Festival and a MacArthur Grant. She also co-directed and edited the film, *REMEMBERING THE ARTIST: ROBERT DENIRO SR.* with Perri Peltz for HBO which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2014. She has been the recipient of a Ford Foundation grant, a MacArthur Grant, among others, and in 2017, she was the recipient of Chicken & Egg Pictures' Chicken & Egg Award.

SAMANTHA (SAM) KNOWLES (Director) is an award-winning Brooklyn-based filmmaker. Most recently she won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Directing in a Documentary Series, and the Gracie Award for Best Director of a National TV Program for the HBO docuseries “Black and Missing”, which brings attention to black and missing persons cases that are routinely neglected by the police and the media. She was also nominated for a Black Reel Award for Outstanding Documentary for “Black and Missing”. The series also won the Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary Series, a Television Academy Honors Award, and an AAFCV TV Award for Best Documentary. In 2021, she partnered with Hewlett - Packard to direct “Generation Impact: The Coder”, which was featured in the inaugural “Brand Storytelling” event at Sundance Film Festival. In 2018, she directed “The Blue Line” which examined the controversy that erupted when a small town painted a blue line on the street in support of police in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement. It premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, was featured in NBC’s Meet The Press Film Festival, and is now part of the prestigious New York Times Op-Doc series. Samantha also directed and produced the award-winning short documentary “Why Do You Have Black Dolls?” which is inspired by a question asked of an 8-year old girl and examines the history and significance of the black doll.

JESS DEVANEY (Producer) is a Brooklyn-based producer and Founder & President of Multitude Films. Her latest films include LOWNDES COUNTY AND THE ROAD TO BLACK POWER); Emmy-nominated PRAY AWAY, executive produced by Ryan Murphy and Blumhouse ; Oscar-shortlisted CALL CENTER BLUES; and APART, the Emmy-winning episode of the series THROUGH OUR EYES (HBO Max). She also produced Sundance Award-winning and IDA-nominated ALWAYS IN SEASON and THE FEELING OF BEING WATCHED , dubbed “a real-world conspiracy thriller” by Variety. Additional credits include Critics' Choice Documentary Award-nominated SPEED SISTERS and Peabody-nominated ROLL RED ROLL , among others. Her films have been programmed at top festivals including Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca, BlackStar, and Telluride. Jess founded QueerDoc and was a Sundance Institute Documentary Edit and Story Lab fellow, Women at Sundance fellow, and Sundance Institute Creative Producing Lab advisor. She received DOC NYC and Topic Studios' inaugural 40 Under 40 Award, Cinereach Producers Award, and Doc10’s inaugural Vanguard Award.

SWETA VOHRA (Producer) is a NYC-based journalist, filmmaker, and producer at Multitude Films. Prior to joining Multitude, she was a producer/director on The New York Times’ series, THE WEEKLY, and produced and directed over a dozen films for FAULT LINES. She was also the producer on the feature documentary THE ANTHRAX ATTACKS. Sweta is a 2021–2022 DOC NYC 40 Under 40 Filmmaker and has received the National Association of Black Journalists

Excellence Award, the Radio Television Digital News Association Kaleidoscope Award, and three News and Documentary Emmy® nominations for her work.

KATHLEEN LINGO (Producer) Kathleen Lingo is the first editorial director of film and television for The New York Times focused on nonfiction feature films and television series based on The Times's journalism. She has produced numerous series and feature docs for the company, including TIME , which premiered at Sundance and was nominated for the 2021 Oscar for Best Documentary Feature, SOME KIND OF HEAVEN , which premiered at Sundance and earned over \$1 million at the box office in 2021, FATHER SOLDIER SON, recognized for Best Editing at Tribeca Film Festival and winner the Best Documentary Editing Emmy in 2021, THE MURDOCHS: EMPIRE OF INFLUENCE (CNN and HBO Max), released in 2022 and named one of The New Yorker's best documentaries of the year, and THE 1619 PROJECT, executive produced by Oprah Winfrey, Nikole Hannah Jones, and Roger Ross Williams. Previously, she was executive producer of The New York Times Op-Docs. During her tenure, the series published 250 documentaries that garnered three Oscar nominations, ten Emmy nominations, three Emmy Awards, two Peabody Awards, and two IDA Awards for Best Short Form series.

NICHOLAS KULISH (Executive Producer) Nicholas Kulish is an enterprise correspondent for The New York Times. In June 2020, he wrote the article, "Bail Funds, Flush With Cash, Learn to 'Grind Through This Horrible Process'" featuring Elisabeth Epps, which was the inspiration for this film. He served as Berlin bureau chief covering Central Europe and East Africa correspondent based in Nairobi, Kenya. He was part of teams that won the George Polk Award for military reporting for a series about Navy SEALs and a citation from the Overseas Press Club for coverage of Saudi Arabia. He joined The Times in 2005 as a member of the editorial board, where he wrote about the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. As a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, he covered the Florida recount and the invasion of Iraq. He is the author of a novel, "Last One In," and co-author of the nonfiction book "The Eternal Nazi." A native of Arlington, Va., he is a graduate of Columbia University and was a Fulbright scholar in Berlin.

ALANA HAUSER (Coordinating Producer) is co-producer of documentary features and series at The New York Times. Before joining The Times, she spent five years at Sundance Institute managing the Catalyst program, which connects documentary and fiction films with financiers, and Women at Sundance, which works to forge gender parity in media.

CREDITS:

HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS PRESENTS
A NEW YORK TIMES PRODUCTION
A MULTITUDE FILMS PRODUCTION

A FILM BY
Geeta Gandbhir and Samantha Knowles

HOW WE GET FREE
Based on The New York Times story "Bail Funds, Flush With Cash,
Learn to 'Grind Through This Horrible Process'" By Nicholas Kulish

DIRECTED BY
Geeta Gandbhir and Samantha Knowles

PRODUCED BY
Kathleen Lingo, Sweta Vohra, and Jess Devaney

EDITED BY
Rabab Haj Yahya

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
Julia Liu

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
Nicholas Kulish
Sam Dolnick
Anya Rous

FOR HBO
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
Nancy Abraham
Lisa Heller
Sara Rodriguez

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS

Jot Sahi
Ryah Aqel

COORDINATING PRODUCER
Alana Hauser

ADDITIONAL FIELD PRODUCER
Paulette Marte

PRODUCTION COORDINATORS
Sarah Yi Fineman
Morgan Hulquist

ADDITIONAL PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
Paula González-Nasser

PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS
Rob Coca
Pablo Pedroso

FACT CHECKING
Kate Sinclair

POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR
Grace Mendenhall

POST ASSOCIATE PRODUCER
Jonathan Portee

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Julio Ramirez

SOUND RECORDISTS
Shuling Yong
Talal Jabari
Jessie Marek

ASSISTANT CAMERA

Keith Heyward

GAFFER

Mary Jeanes

GRIP

Brandon McKain-Miller

DIT

Keith Heyward

ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

Asad Faruqi

Rob Coca

SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR / RE-RECORDING MIXER

Filipe Messeder

DIALOGUE AND SOUND EFFECTS

Todd Yeager

ASSISTANT SOUND EDITOR

Abby Harrison

POST SOUND SERVICES PROVIDED BY

Postworks

HEAD OF POST PRODUCTION SOUND

Jay Rubin

POST SOUND PRODUCER

Emily Gilmer

MIX TECHNICIAN

Jairo Garcia

FINISHING SERVICES

theColourSpace

FINISHING ARTIST

Juan Salvo

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY

Laura Heinzinger

GRAPHICS BY

Oh, MY Productions!

FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FILM/TV BUSINESS

Erik Borenstein

LEGAL SERVICES

Dana Green

FOR MULTITUDE FILMS

VICE PRESIDENT OF FINANCE, MULTITUDE FILMS

Ameena Din

FINANCE ASSISTANT, MULTITUDE FILMS

Jake Seymour

HEAD OF BUSINESS AFFAIRS, MULTITUDE FILMS

Sara McFarlane

PRODUCTION LEGAL SERVICES

Reavis Page Jump LLP

Nicole Page

Michelle Lamardo

Katie Bigley

Ylana Stumer Hersh

THANKS

Colorado Freedom Fund

MJ Coleman

Kwasi Craigwell

Clara Davies

Rachel B. Doyle

Alexis Galfas

Jessica Howard

Qusair Mohamedbhai

Stephanie Preiss

Anna Richman

Caitlin Roper

Daria Serna

Eric Sloss

Sofia Smith

Jason Stallman

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL COURTESY OF

Adam Trujillo

Deep Badhesha @DeepNotShallow

Eme Freethinker

Getty Images

Carlo Gian

Tim Givan

Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite.com

Colin Lloyd

Stock Media provided by EdgeofReason / Pond5

DISTRIBUTION ADVISORY SERVICES

Cinetic Media

Copyright © 2023 The New York Times Company. All Rights Reserved. This motion picture is protected under the Copyright Laws of the United States and other countries throughout the world. Country of first publication: The United States. Any unauthorized exhibition, distribution, or copying of this film or any part thereof (including soundtrack) may result in civil liability and criminal prosecution.

The New York Times


multitudefilms

HBOMAX™