



# Press Forward: A Guide for Local Funders

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[pressforward.news/guide](https://pressforward.news/guide)

## **We are in the midst of a news and information crisis. As local newsrooms disappear across America, a growing number of communities have experienced fading civic engagement, eroding social bonds, surging misinformation and dwindling governmental accountability.**

Local journalists play a key role in ensuring people are informed about important issues and prepared to engage in civic life. Yet despite the crucial role of journalism in the health of our democracy, the industry is struggling. Newsroom budgets are shrinking, newspapers across the country are closing at a rapid pace and efforts to spread disinformation are threatening the stability of local news.

**This crisis has been decades in the making, but there is hope.** Individuals and organizations are working on a broad range of strategies to strengthen local journalism and address crucial gaps for their communities. To support and continue to galvanize these efforts, a coalition of national, regional and local funders [came together](#) in 2023 to increase philanthropic support for local news.

Press Forward aims to grow the overall investment in local news and strengthen communities across the country over the next five years by focusing on such shared values as equity, accessibility, collaboration and centering community needs. The vision of the founding coalition is to increase resources for local news by supporting efforts to move from individual grantmaking to a shared vision and coordinated action for investments in high-impact local news organizations and projects.

There is incredible excitement and potential in this new effort. However, recognizing the challenges in building systems to center the expertise and perspectives of local funders is also important. Although this initiative is new, it leverages previous work done by many local leaders, some of which is summarized here by Molly de Aguiar from Independence Public Media Foundation (IPMF) and Josh Stearns at Democracy Fund in [The Transformative Power of Letting Go](#). We are also grateful to Teresa Gorman, who has run Democracy Fund's Ecosystem News efforts for half a decade. There are many lessons from past efforts by national funders to engage with local stakeholders around [place-based funding](#) that are relevant for this moment.

The success of Press Forward is dependent on the involvement of national, regional and local funders.

**This guide is designed for funders at the local level.**

By engaging with community members and diverse stakeholders throughout the process of assessing your local news ecosystem and setting shared priorities, you can ensure that your investments are responding to the greatest news and information needs in your community.

Here are some signs that your organization might be well-positioned to take the lead in creating a Press Forward local chapter:

1. Your foundation already funds local journalism, and you or your team have a sense of some of the key players in local news.
2. Your foundation has examples from your past work that can make a compelling case to other funders that are considering investments in local news.
3. You want to share what you've learned from others and bring the best ideas from other places back to your community.
4. Your foundation is collaborative and wants to or has already worked with other funders in your region to increase impact and have a shared vision for your news ecosystem.
5. Your foundation is poised to dedicate staff and resources to this effort.

This resource is designed to provide background information and case studies to support local grantmakers and/or coalitions of grantmakers that want to start funding journalism or get involved with Press Forward.

Since the conversations about local news and information are dependent on local relationships and knowledge, [local chapters](#) play an important role in Press Forward.

**Local chapters are led by local or regional coalitions committed to supporting local news information ecosystems. Many early chapters are led by an anchor partner, often a local foundation or ecosystem hub organization. Chapters must be approved by Press Forward and will receive guidance from advisers, access to a learning community and partnership in fundraising efforts. Visit [pressforward.news/locals](https://pressforward.news/locals) for more information.**

This guide is organized into the following sections with examples, links and resources:

#### I What Are Local News Ecosystems?

#### II Lessons From The Field

- Press Forward Minnesota
- Press Forward Wichita
- Press Forward Philadelphia

#### III How To Get Started

- Planning
- Sample Timeline
- Ecosystem Mapping
- Sample Documents

#### IV Additional Resources

#### V Connect and Share

Press Forward: A Guide for Local Funders was written in January 2024 by Sarah Gustavus Lim and Katie Hawkins-Gaar. This is a living guide that will be periodically updated as new information becomes available and new insights can be shared from the field.

If you have comments or questions about the guide, please reach out by emailing [hello@pressforward.news](mailto:hello@pressforward.news).

## What are Press Forward Locals?

Press Forward Locals are local or regional chapters that form and leverage funder collaborations to make local news information ecosystems, and your communities, healthier. Chapters are led by an anchor partner committed to:

- Building or expanding financial investment to its local news ecosystem by standing up pooled funds and gathering local stakeholders, foundations and donors to advocate for a long-term investment in local news.
- Creating a vision for a local news ecosystem's future through a willingness to listen and learn from diverse stakeholders, conduct research and hold ongoing conversations with the community.
- Being part of a nationwide network, sharing models and lessons learned with other chapters and Press Forward's larger funder community.

Press Forward Locals are provided with guidance from advisers, given access to a learning community, support and partnership in fundraising efforts.

If you have general questions or are in early stages of exploration for starting a local chapter, please email [hello@pressforward.news](mailto:hello@pressforward.news).

Thanks to the [Public Square](#) program at Democracy Fund, which has been investing in building and supporting news ecosystems around the country for more than six years, including Josh Stearns, Teresa Gorman, Angelica Das, Christine Schmidt, Lea Trusty and Paul Waters. Thanks as well to Molly de Aguiar, president of the Independence Media Foundation, whose work has inspired so many ecosystem builders.

Cover image: Lenfest Institute's 2022 Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange graduation. Credit: Zamani Feelings.

# I. What Are Local News Ecosystems?

## Over the past decade, funders and advocates for journalism have started to use the framing of ecosystems to assess the current state of local news and build new infrastructure systems for increasing funding for local journalism and the capacity of local outlets.

There's more than one way to define a local news ecosystem. The boundaries of an ecosystem can be drawn based on geography, shared culture, where people live and work or other connections that create a shared need for accurate local news.

Democracy Fund, which has funded organizations working in local news ecosystem development through the Public Square program, [defines a local news ecosystem](#) as “the network of institutions, collaborations and people that local communities rely on for news, information and engagement.”

Democracy Fund has supported the launch and growth of ecosystem hubs and pooled funder collaboratives in several states, including the [Center for Cooperative Media](#) at Montclair State in New Jersey, the [Chicago Independent Media Alliance](#), [Colorado Media Project](#), the Field Foundation [Journalism & Storytelling](#) program, the [New Jersey Civic Information Consortium](#), [New Mexico Local News Fund](#), [North Carolina Local News Lab Fund](#) and [Oklahoma Media Center](#).

These organizations have conducted research on existing local news providers and identified gaps in local news coverage, organized collaboratives, built relationships between journalism and non-journalism partners and distributed funding for local news and information.

**Report:** [How Funding Local News Ecosystems Helps American Communities Thrive](#) (Democracy Fund, 2023)

Each local news ecosystem is unique. While conversations and strategies for a rural news ecosystem will look different than those of an urban news ecosystem, for example, many local news ecosystems are facing similar challenges:

- 1. “News deserts,” or communities where there is a measurable decrease in access to local news, are increasing.** According to the [2022 State of Local News report](#), more than a fourth of newspapers across the country have closed since 2005, and even more are at risk of disappearing. More than 200 counties in the U.S. have no local newspaper. Additionally, in some communities, newspapers that remain in publication don't have any local staff, making them “ghost newspapers.” Quantifying exactly how many newspapers fall into this category is difficult, but the State of Local News Project found in a recent review that 70 small newspapers owned by two large ownership chains had no local staff. And newspapers are just one measure of the health of local journalism — access to local news via radio, television, social media and other digital platforms is crucial to consider, too.
- 2. The news industry is in crisis, but many do not know this.** From layoffs, furloughs and salary cuts to the public's declining trust in the news media and polarization of audiences, local news is in crisis. While this fact might seem obvious, many communities — including community foundations — don't yet realize the scope of the problem or view local journalism as a public good.
- 3. Organizations led by and serving the news and information needs of BIPOC communities have not received equal philanthropic support.** This is significant because these are the same communities that have not seen themselves reflected accurately in journalism. For example, according to a [2023 report](#) by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Black adults (63 percent) say news about Black people is often more negative than news about other racial and ethnic groups. The newsrooms and community organizations that reflect and are responsive to local communities need more support to grow and thrive.
- 4. In some communities, there are trusted individuals who are not journalists but are serving important news and information needs.** Funders must consider funding strategies to support a range of sources of information and bring together diverse stakeholders that can provide a full picture of the gaps and potential solutions for addressing information needs in local news ecosystems.

**5. While there has been an increase in training and support available to journalism organizations, finding the time to take advantage of those opportunities can be challenging.** There are now many high-quality programs offered through journalism support organizations that provide training and resources on revenue generation, nonprofit and business management and community engagement. But fully taking advantage of those resources takes time, and the leaders of small, community-focused organizations are constantly pulled between the demands of news production and long-term planning for sustainability.

**6. In newsrooms, recruiting and retaining journalists is difficult.** This is especially true of early-career journalists. There is a dearth of entry-level jobs and, for many aspiring journalists, the [pathway to working in journalism is unclear](#). The low pay prevalent in local news is a barrier for many people to begin careers in journalism or remain in them in a sustainable way. Journalists face unique stressors, too, including vicarious trauma, burnout and safety and security concerns.

There's no single strategy that will save local news. A variety of strategies will need to be deployed in each ecosystem, with continued guidance from locals who understand and care about their community. Here are just a few examples of inspiration from the field:

- The [Pivot Fund](#), which supports BIPOC-led community news organizations through funding, capacity building, training sessions and networking, was created to address that disparity. In the report [Architects of Necessity](#), Tracie M. Powell and Meredith D. Clark, PhD highlight the challenges BIPOC leaders face in accessing philanthropic support and strategies that could help meaningfully close those gaps, such as increased general operating support. The Pivot Fund is [also mapping](#) the emerging ecosystem in the Midwest.
- In North Carolina, a coalition of local and national funders launched the North Carolina Local News Lab Fund to address access to local news. Six years later, the strategic investment in BIPOC-led organizations and community-centered programs has yielded several [examples of impact](#) that are informative for local and national leaders.
- And in Colorado, the Colorado News Collaborative (COLab), Colorado Media Project and Colorado Health Foundation convened working groups of community members that led to four reports providing a roadmap for funding and projects as part of the [Advancing Equity in Local News](#) grant program.

To further dive into the complexity of local news ecosystems, you may be interested in this report on civic journalism, which draws from interviews with a variety of news leaders, member organizations, networks, funders and researchers: [A Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs](#).