



Press Forward: A Guide for Local Funders

Press
Forward 

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 for more information.

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

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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.

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.

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?

Photo: Unsplash/Kal Visuals

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](#).

A man with a beard and short hair is wearing large over-ear headphones and a professional microphone. He is smiling and looking slightly to his right. He is wearing a dark turtleneck sweater. The background is a blurred studio or office environment with shelves and equipment. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

II. Lessons From The Field Press Forward Locals

As we outlined in the introduction, Press Forward needs local leaders to engage with other potential funders in order to succeed.

Leaders in philanthropy working at the ecosystem level of their community with multiple stakeholders can play a crucial role in developing and maintaining relationships to support local fundraising. They can also inform national foundations about the greatest opportunities for high-impact investments.

Press Forward has identified three stages of ecosystem development in communities across the country: Nascent, Expanding and Flourishing. We invited leaders from three local chapters to share what they've learned so far.

Photo: Getty



Community members and media gather for the ribbon cutting of a community solar garden on the roof of Shiloh Temple in North Minneapolis. Courtesy: McKnight Foundation

Press Forward Minnesota

In September 2023, the McKnight Foundation was announced as the founding member of [Press Forward Minnesota](#). But McKnight's funding in the media and journalism space goes back several decades.

"We are a place-based funder, working across the state of Minnesota, across the Midwest on climate, as well as globally on food systems," explained Tim Murphy, a program officer at McKnight who oversees the foundation's Press Forward efforts. He explained that McKnight has long supported local news and information in Minnesota "as an acknowledgement that having strong media and journalism in our backyard — in the areas that we work — is a key determinant of civic health. It strengthens the environment for civic engagement and democratic participation and for communities to be more connected and informed."

When conversations about Press Forward began to take place across Minnesota and nationwide, Murphy said, "there was an opportunity for McKnight to step up and play a leading role." Given the family foundation's history in supporting news and information, existing relationships with local news partners, and commitment to the work, it was a natural fit.

Press Forward defines Minnesota as a **nascent ecosystem**, meaning it's in the earliest stages of development. Despite the state's strong commitment to philanthropy, Murphy explained, "there hasn't been a lot of dedicated funding in this space." Now, with Press Forward Minnesota's pooled grantmaking fund, Murphy said there's a renewed interest in supporting local journalism and thinking more strategically about how to better support Minnesota's news ecosystem.

Nascent Ecosystems

Nascent ecosystems are in the earliest stages of development. Potential donors and foundations are new to funding journalism, perhaps preparing for the first grants in this area. Some of the key activities of nascent ecosystem leaders may include conducting landscape research and building the case for funding local news.

These ecosystems may include news deserts or areas where there is limited access to information. There are many potential barriers for local news and information, including lack of news coverage in the language people speak or read, limited broadband access and few reporters covering a geographically large area or a densely populated community.

Other nascent news ecosystems include [Press Forward Alaska](#), led by the Atwood Foundation, and Press Forward Springfield, which is being led by the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

Here are a few of Press Forward Minnesota's earliest takeaways for other local funders looking to support news and information in their communities:

Hire early for the positions you need to carry out the work. Because Murphy splits his time between Press Forward Minnesota and his other responsibilities as a program officer at McKnight, getting the local chapter up and running has taken some time. As Press Forward chapters take shape, Murphy recommends developing a plan from the outset to dedicate enough staff and resources "to go full steam ahead."

In McKnight's case, the foundation is hiring a consultant to help develop and manage Press Forward Minnesota. The consultant will be working in 2024 on the development of:

- A shared set of values and goals to align parties involved in Press Forward Minnesota
- A grantmaking framework for the Press Forward Minnesota pooled fund
- Strategic recommendations for sessions at two high-level journalism convenings in Minnesota
- Fundraising opportunities for the pooled fund
- A recommended structural approach to ensure long-term success and
- A policy agenda and identification and prioritization of potential policy approaches.

Build a diverse team. In addition to hiring a consultant, Murphy's top priorities are putting together an advisory committee and a steering committee for Press Forward Minnesota. While there might be some overlap between members, Murphy said the advisory committee will be a larger group, focused on determining the chapter's goals and strategies, while the steering committee will be smaller, focused on decisions related to the pooled fund.

"Finding the right committee members will be a tremendous opportunity to double down on our commitment to equity, leading to stronger solutions," Murphy said. "The circle of people who have led this work in Minnesota over the years has been pretty small, pretty white and pretty male." Pulling together a diverse group of stakeholders will be a challenge but a worthwhile one, he added. Just as newsrooms need to better reflect and represent the communities they cover, so do funders.

Murphy said he is planning to develop "really transparent, clear, criteria" explaining why and how the committees must be diverse — in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and location in Minnesota. "I think it will be really important and honestly one of the keys to success if we're going to have our desired impact here in Minnesota."

WHY FUNDING JOURNALISM MATTERS

"Having strong media and journalism in our backyard is a key determinant of civic health. It strengthens the environment for civic engagement and democratic participation and for communities to be more connected and informed."

— Tim Murphy, McKnight Foundation

Make the connection and build partnerships. Murphy has encountered some funders who are wary of supporting journalism. A big part of his job is to convince them why it's a smart investment — and why local news goes hand in hand with issues they care about. "In order to have policy wins, you need a public who understands what's happening," Murphy explained. "You need the infrastructure of information to be available to make progress." Fortunately, he continued, "Bush Foundation, Minnesota Council on Foundations, and Glen Nelson Center have been early partners in the work to help carry the initiative forward."

Keep an open mind. As Murphy is developing a game plan for Press Forward Minnesota, he also acknowledges that the plan will undoubtedly change over time. He's not afraid to admit what he doesn't know and is open to asking others in the journalism funding space and across Minnesota for their perspectives and help. "You have to keep an open mind because it's such a dynamic field in such a dynamic, uncertain time," he said.

In the early stages of developing a local chapter, it's important to challenge assumptions while assessing the news ecosystem. Within Minnesota, for example, Murphy explained that there are a variety of smaller ecosystems with different consumption habits, demographics, and ways of interacting with the news. "I don't think anyone really fully understands it all at the moment," he shared. "There's a lot of information yet to be gleaned." That's one of the key reasons why McKnight and Joyce Foundation partnered with the Pivot Fund early on in the process to commission a landscape analysis to better understand the news and information ecosystem across the state and identify opportunities and needs through an equity lens.



130 Wichitans participated in a Community Conversation. Fernando Salazar/
Wichita Beacon

Press Forward Wichita

For Courtney Bengtson, overseeing [Press Forward Wichita](#) is a full-circle career moment. Bengtson moved to Wichita to study journalism at Wichita State University and briefly worked at the Wichita Eagle. Later, as a graduate student at Wichita State, she landed an internship at the Wichita State University Foundation, a move that kickstarted her career in philanthropy.

Having a background in journalism isn't necessary to get involved in funding local journalism, Bengtson said, but it has been an asset for her. "I have a huge passion for making sure people are informed," Bengtson said, adding that "the inquisitiveness and research skills from my journalism background have done dividends to get to this point in my career."

Today, Bengtson is the chief strategy officer at the [Wichita Foundation](#). As part of her role, she manages the foundation's unrestricted grant portfolio, which is focused on three areas: nonprofit elevation, economic mobility and news and information.

The foundation landed on news and information after completing a multi-year, deep-dive predictive analytics project called Focus Forward, identifying what Wichita needed to do "to make sure that we stayed competitive in the mid-sized community world," Bengtson explained. One of the main findings of the project was that access to news and information was limited across Wichita.

"When that [analysis] came back," Bengtson recalled, "we realized that people don't feel informed or engaged about issues that matter most to them." It was a light bulb moment for Bengtson and her colleagues: "We really can't tackle other [citywide] challenges until the community

feels that they have a base level of understanding of the problems and opportunities in our community. We felt like, as a community builder, we can be the ones that champion that work.” From that point on, news and information became one of the Wichita Foundation’s top priorities.

In September 2023, in line with the national launch of Press Forward, the Wichita Foundation rebranded its focus on news and information to “Press Forward Wichita.” Press Forward defines Wichita as an **expanding ecosystem**, home to a diverse set of local news outlets but requiring additional support and funding to fully serve the news and information needs of its community.

Expanding Ecosystems

After building out of the nascent stage, Expanding Ecosystems include a diverse set of local news outlets but are still in need of support to grow and fully serve the news and information needs of local communities. They are undercapitalized with great potential for growth with local investment. Local funding needs to be expanded to support the growing ecosystem.

Another example of an expanding news ecosystem is [Press Forward Chicago](#), led by the MacArthur Foundation and The Chicago Community Trust.

Here are Press Forward Wichita’s top lessons:

Prioritize collaboration. Given the limited resources and staff sizes at local news outlets, Bengtson believes strongly in the power of collaboration between journalists to work together on investigations, share ideas and commiserate about challenges in the field. Over the past five years, the Wichita Foundation has provided 31 scholarships for journalists to attend field-specific conferences across the country. And in spring 2020, they partnered with the Solutions Journalism Network to create the [Wichita Journalism Collective](#), which brings local news partners together to combine resources and explore problems and solutions related to specific issues facing the greater Wichita region.

Building a culture of collaboration can be slow, Bengtson noted. “For many years, it was uncomfortable,” she said, recalling early efforts to build camaraderie and openness among local journalists. “But now, they’re meeting regularly on their own without being prompted to. To me, that’s an impactful success.”

The Press Forward model also offers a unique opportunity for community foundations to work together to create a community of learning and practice across the country.

WHY FUNDING JOURNALISM MATTERS

“We really can’t tackle other [citywide] challenges until the community feels that they have a base level of understanding of the problems and opportunities in our community.”

—Courtney Bengtson, Wichita Foundation

Bring stakeholders together. Any big decisions regarding Press Forward Wichita — what investments to make, programs and initiatives to support, newsrooms to give funds to — are made by the chapter’s Strike Team. This six-person group, comprised of foundation board members and community members, meets on an as-needed basis.

“We’re working to engage the community in everything we do, and the Strike Team is one way to do that,” Bengtson said.

In the summer of 2023, Press Forward Wichita’s Strike Team approved a [\\$100,000 investment](#) in the Tiny News Collective’s Info Challenge, “a quest to identify and launch information concepts off the ground.” That fall, a smaller community advisory committee met to provide feedback on which organization would receive those funds.

So far, Press Forward Wichita has identified Strike Team members by word of mouth, including recommendations from board members and partners at the American Journalism Project. They’ve also received tips from various community surveys. Bengtson said that they might create a formal nomination process in the future, but right now, “we have no shortage of volunteers.”

Develop a plan for measuring success. The Wichita Foundation recently hired an equity and evaluation consultant to measure what Press Forward Wichita (and its overall news and information efforts) has accomplished so far and provide recommendations on what needs to be done to continue this work.

“We realize that we need to have some hard numbers to be able to talk about the success that we’ve had,” Bengtson said. While she can “tell tons of stories” about the changes she’s seen within Wichita’s news ecosystem, a consultant will help provide specific metrics to measure that change.

Just as you assess your current investments, have a plan for gathering and assessing new developments in your local news ecosystem. You can utilize existing metrics and incorporate new benchmarks into long-term plans for local programs.

“Community foundations don’t always take the time to stop and look at what successes we are having,” Bengtson said. “We’re definitely going to be focusing on that this year.”

Be patient. The Wichita Foundation’s initial commitment was to fund local news and information for three years. That commitment was extended two additional years. And now, with Press Forward Wichita, it has been extended another five years.

“Anytime you want to make systemic change, it’s going to take longer than a five-year period,” Bengtson said.

Remember that systemic change and shifting the field for journalism funding will take time, likely longer than the initial five-year commitment outlined by the coalition of funders that launched Press Forward. Local leaders in philanthropy and journalism should consider developing a vision that can continue to grow well into the future.

What’s next: This spring, Press Forward Wichita will announce some new funding commitments, allowing it to double its amount of grants. “That’s completely attributed to the fact that we’re now amongst a group of funders working toward the same goal,” Bengtson said. The local chapter has made a three-year commitment to bring the [Documenters](#) program to Wichita. It also recently re-upped an 18-month commitment to the [Wichita Journalism Collaborative](#), focused on building sustainability practices. And in March 2024, Press Forward Wichita will host the MacArthur Foundation and Knight Foundation for a funders roundtable and a community event focused on the impact that local news and information can have on Wichita.



Celebrating the 2023 class of the Lenfest Institute's Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange, a community-grounded accelerator program supporting BIPOC media entrepreneurs through training, one-on-one coaching, and grantmaking. Photo by Zamani Feelings.

Press Forward Philadelphia

In recent years, organizations and projects in Philadelphia have often been highlighted in reports at conferences and in the national [press](#) as potential models for journalism and philanthropy. The city has a deep historic commitment to democracy and a free press.

The [Lenfest Institute for Journalism](#) has played a key role in increasing investments in the local news ecosystem while also engaging with and advising news organizations nationally. The organization is the non-controlling owner of The Philadelphia Inquirer, which in 2016 became the largest American newspaper under nonprofit ownership. The Lenfest Institute model of nonprofit ownership has been replicated by other newspapers across the country, from Salt Lake City to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, New Jersey to Maine.

In addition to supporting diversity, community engagement and digital innovation at The Inquirer, Lenfest invests in the local Philadelphia news ecosystems through several targeted programs, often in collaboration with other funders:

- [Philadelphia Local News Sustainability Initiative](#), which invested \$2 million dollars over two years in providing core operating support and business capacity-building funding to 17 nonprofit and for-profit local news organizations serving the Philadelphia region.
- The [Every Voice, Every Vote](#) project, a coalition of 25 news organizations and more than 50 community organizations that came together to cover local elections in 2023. This collaborative project was managed by The Lenfest Institute, with support provided by the William Penn Foundation, Comcast NBCUniversal, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and others.

- The [Philadelphia Media Founders Exchange](#), a community-grounded business accelerator program supporting BIPOC media entrepreneurs through training, one-on-one coaching and grantmaking. This initiative is also supported by The Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund and the Independence Public Media Foundation.
- The [Lenfest Next Generation Fund](#) supports professional development opportunities for Philadelphia-area journalists and students of color.
- The [Constellation News Leadership Initiative](#) provides career development support to mid-career media professionals of color.

Executive Director and CEO [Jim Friedlich](#) says despite the fact that the Philadelphia news ecosystem is more developed in some ways than other places, there are still meaningful challenges that need to be addressed by philanthropic and local news leaders, including a diverse array of multicultural news organizations in need of support.

He says a key strength of Philadelphia's [local news ecosystem](#) is that journalism is already part of the conversation in local philanthropy. Local funders understand that local journalism is critical for our democracy, which is aligned with the mission of Press Forward.

There are four principal local funders in Philadelphia journalism: The Lenfest Institute, Independence Public Media Foundation, Wyncote Foundation and the [William Penn Foundation](#). The city has also seen significant financial commitments from national funders in recent years, including the Knight Foundation.

After a five-year joint fund called the [Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund](#) wrapped up in 2023, the Lenfest Institute committed to lead a new local Press Forward chapter to organize strategy development, outreach and communication. "Every local chapter needs a backbone organization," said Friedlich, "to help organize a coalition of the willing."

Flourishing Ecosystems

In some places, the local news ecosystem is already highly developed with existing investments from local and national funders. These ecosystems can provide valuable lessons for other emerging ecosystems across the country. One of the challenges for Flourishing Ecosystems is the need to ensure there is continued financial support that allows local news providers to not only thrive but also continue to innovate in order to best serve their communities.

Other flourishing news ecosystems include Press Forward Colorado, which will be led by Gates Family Foundation, and Press Forward New Jersey, which will be led by New Jersey Civic Information Consortium.

The Lenfest Institute hosted the 2022 Local News Summit, a national gathering at which the first discussions about Press Forward took place among the MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation and The Lenfest Institute.

Friedlich sees potential in the collaborative model and the potential to appeal to new funders through multiple opportunities to invest in local news.

Collaboration is crucial for Press Forward nationally, and the Philadelphia ecosystem is an example of how it can boost the impact of reporting in a local ecosystem. Funded by Knight and Lenfest, the multi-year collaborative reporting on poverty and economic justice done through the [Broke in Philly](#) initiative has evolved into [Resolve Philly](#), an organization that supports innovative efforts to make journalism more equitable and responsive to the needs of local communities. Resolve's newest effort, the [Philadelphia Journalism Collaborative](#), succeeded Broke in Philly in 2023. Most recently, Knight and Lenfest have invested to bring the [Documenters](#) program to Philadelphia.

In 2024-2025, [Every Voice Every Vote](#), Philadelphia's largest collaborative news enterprise, will continue to report on city government and to encourage civic engagement. New ecosystem-wide funding is expected from William Penn Foundation, Comcast NBCUniversal, The Lenfest Institute and the Knight Foundation.

Although he says the framing of "flourishing" may not fully capture the challenges that the ecosystem continues to face, Friedlich says he does believe that there are lessons from Philadelphia worth sharing.

Here are some top lessons for other potential local chapters:

Develop a multi-tiered strategy. Friedlich attributes part of the success so far in Philadelphia to having a strategy that went beyond one newspaper or one approach to strengthening local news. “At the end of the day, people need compelling, scaleable and practical programs to help advance their work,” he said. “We’ve developed a highly replicable three-tiered approach to working in the ecosystem: First, we invest in the professional development of individuals; second, we invest in news organizations and community organizations; third, we invest in the news ecosystem as a whole to help build citywide collaboration and impact.”

Getting started may be easier than it sounds. If your foundation is looking to get started funding local journalism, Friedlich advises considering straight-forward, low-risk early investments such as supporting a local news ecosystem information needs assessment or investing in professional training for local journalists. Each of these start-up initiatives is a relatively low-cost, high-impact entry point. Replicable professional training examples include the [Lenfest Next Generation Fund](#) and the [Constellation News Leadership Initiative](#). A sample local news needs assessment can be found here: [The News Philadelphians Use](#).

Encourage other funders to align journalism with their existing priorities. If your aim is to build a coalition of funds to support local news, using the framework and messaging of Press Forward can help you make that case. Local journalism is crucial for ensuring that other efforts to focus on important social issues are addressed.

Learn and share insights. Friedlich says Press Forward created a new opportunity for ecosystem leaders to learn and share ([How The Lenfest Institute is measuring impact in the Philadelphia Media Ecosystem](#)). Successful chapter leaders will take advantage of the opportunity to learn from their peers in other places.

What’s Next: Friedlich says Lenfest and Press Forward Philadelphia will continue to engage in programmatic priorities in three tiers, leveraging opportunities at the individual, organization and ecosystem levels. They also intend to share what they are learning with other ecosystems, and he welcomes conversations about developing strategies that can be replicated in many communities: “Our mission is to share our learning, our successes and our mistakes with others, to help rebuild local news throughout America.”

A MULTI-TIERED APPROACH OF INVESTING

“First, we invest in the professional development of individuals; second, we invest in news organizations and community organizations; third, we invest in the news ecosystem as a whole to help build citywide collaboration and impact.”

—Jim Friedlich, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

III. How To Get Started



Photo: Unsplash/Austin Distel

Planning

If you are starting to bring together stakeholders, including local journalists and other civic leaders, designing a framework for conversations before you begin is helpful.

Democracy Fund provides some useful guidance on utilizing census data, assessing existing infrastructure for local news and determining the best strategies for data collection in [Section 2 of the Guide To Assessing Your Local News Ecosystem](#).

You may also want to consider the framework developed by the Listening Post Collective for deep engagement with communities about their news and information needs:

[Guided DIY Civic Media Playbook for Community-Led Projects](#) (Listening Post Collective)

Building coalitions takes time, often more time than you imagine when you get started. If you are bringing together local funders and other stakeholders that do not normally collaborate, make sure to set aside time for relationship building before digging into the details of collaboration.

Sample Timeline

This is an example of [planned activities](#) over one year from the Press Forward Minnesota chapter, led by the [McKnight Foundation](#).

Remember that your timeline will be dependent on existing relationships and programming in your community and/or local news ecosystem. You may need to give yourself more time to carry out some of these activities, particularly the early-stage relationship building with local journalists or other local funders.

Q1

- Identify fundraising opportunities and set goals for pooled fund
 - Begin funder and partner engagement to ensure community is informed and aware of opportunities related to the initiative
- Coordinate and connect Pivot Fund as landscape analysis begins
- Identify possible Advisory Committee and Steering Committee members
 - Advisory Committee — practitioners and funders with goal of providing strategic input to the pooled fund

- Steering Committee — smaller group dedicated to decision making for pooled fund
- Plan early for two large Press Forward-adjacent convenings: AJPalooza in May and Report for America convening in July

Q2

- Continue fundraising
 - Including plugging into Press Forward National efforts to identify funding opportunities there
- Planning for public launch of PF Minnesota, to coincide with AJPalooza
 - Confirm with AJP if this can be a complementary panel and session
 - Also draft press release
- Finalize Advisory Committee and Steering Committee appointments
- Finalize grantmaking strategy and structure (open vs closed, single or multiyear)

Q3

- Grantmaking begins — shepherd the process in partnership with MCF
- Planning for Report for America event — possible side panel and fundraising opportunity
- Fundraising continues — assess whether on track to meet goals and reassess targets

Q4

- Grantmaking continues
- Begin writing a year one recap to be shared with the field
 - Learnings, adaptations and lessons to take into year two

Ecosystem Mapping

Mapping your local news ecosystem can be incredibly valuable for individual funders and groups of funders. It can help you identify existing local news outlets, assess where people are going for news and find crucial gaps in coverage.

One of the first challenges of ecosystem mapping is identifying local news producers. This can be harder than it sounds because news can be produced in many different formats and targeted for different communities, which Sarah Stonbely found at the Center for Cooperative Media in its [mapping of the New Jersey local news ecosystem](#):

“Understanding any local news ecosystem is impossible without first understanding the depth and breadth of news production there. It sounds simple, but the reality of answering that question with data is much more complex. Quite obviously, producers of local news operate in several media: print, broadcast and online. Failing to account for any one medium will produce an inaccurate picture of the local news landscape in question. The problem is, no comprehensive list or database exists that covers local news producers across all media.”

—Sarah Stonbely, Center for Cooperative Media

Ecosystem mapping can be accomplished in many different forms with various partners, from university researchers and humanities scholars to organizations that promote civic dialogue. Mapping and landscape reports should not stop with a list of existing local media but also reveal gaps in news and information and the needs identified by community members themselves.

Here are a few recent examples of initial ecosystem mapping reports from various communities:

[The News Philadelphians Use](#) (Center for Media Engagement, with support from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism and Independence Public Media Foundation, 2023)

[Georgia News Landscape Analysis](#) (Pivot Fund for Georgia News Collaborative, 2023)

[Oklahoma’s News Media Ecosystem: Phase 2](#) (Oklahoma Media Center, 2023)

[Who’s Doing Local News](#) (Colorado Media Project, 2023)

[Assessing Oregon’s Local News & Information Ecosystem](#) (Agora Journalism Center, 2022)

[Southern New Mexico News & Information Ecosystem Assessment](#) (New Mexico Local News Fund, 2021)

[What Makes For Robust Local News Provision?](#) (Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, 2021)

[Chicago News Landscape](#) (Center for Media Engagement in partnership with City Bureau, 2018)

Some goals of ecosystem mapping may include: identifying where there are gaps in news access; creating a list of current news providers; developing a rigorous framework for measuring improvements over time; testing assumptions about local news access; and identifying high potential areas of investment for local and national funders.

Sample Documents

MESSAGING & DONOR RECRUITMENT

[How we know journalism is good for democracy](#)
(Democracy Fund)

[Lenfest Institute: Partner with Us](#)
(Lenfest Institute for Journalism)

[Press Forward Minnesota Effort Launches to Strengthen Local News](#)
(Press Forward Minnesota)

[Press Forward Wichita to Level Up Local News](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

[Wichita Foundation Joins Press Forward, A National Effort to Revitalize Local News](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

HIRING

[Minnesota Coordinator](#) (McKnight Foundation)

Scope of Work (Wichita Foundation)

WF is interested in engaging a consultant to better understand its Fund for Wichita (unrestricted fund) outcomes and opportunity gaps. WF would like to partner with a consultant to answer the following questions:

- Are there any unintended consequences or side effects – positive or negative – resulting from our Fund for Wichita work?
- To what extent has the Fund for Wichita achieved its intended outcomes and objectives?
- How do we define the overall impact of the Fund for Wichita and/or communicate it?
- What factors have contributed to the successes and/or challenges faced by grantees?
- What lessons can be learned from the program's implementation and impact?
- What else needs to be done to truly “move the needle?” What does it mean to “move the needle?”
- Do we have the correct level of human and financial capacity to impact this work at a deep level?

ANNOUNCEMENTS

[Info Challenge Seeks Information Solutions in Wichita](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

[WF News And Info Fund Invests \\$100,000 In National Partnership To Kickstart Three Information Sources](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

[Wichita Journalism Collaborative Focuses On Mental Health Solutions](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

[WF, Envision And Sonify Collaborate On Data-Driven Audio Solutions For The Blind And Visually Impaired](#)
(Wichita Foundation)

IV. Additional Resources

Journalism Support Organizations

Here are some of the key organizations that offer programming, support for capacity building and funding targeted to local news outlets across the United States:

American Journalism Project makes grants to nonprofit news organizations, partners with communities to launch new organizations and coaches leaders as they grow and sustain their newsrooms.

American Press Institute supports local and community-based media through research, programs and products that foster healthy, responsive and resilient news organizations.

Center for Community Media serves news organizations that are providing essential local coverage for populations whose voices and issues are underrepresented in mainstream media. The Center serves as a hub of information, resources and training aimed at increasing the sustainability of this news media sector.

Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) supports independent news organizations that are nonprofit, nonpartisan and dedicated to public service.

Lenfest provides grant funding, runs training programs and synthesizes best practices to develop and disseminate sustainable solutions for local news providers.

LION Publishers strengthens the local news industry by helping independent news publishers build more sustainable businesses.

National Trust for Local News is dedicated to keeping local news in local hands by working with communities to catalyze the capital, new ownership structures and business model transformations needed for established local and community news organizations to thrive and remain deeply grounded in their community.

Rebuild Local News is a nonpartisan, nonprofit coalition organization that advances public policies to counter the collapse of local news and revitalize community journalism.

Tiny News Collective supports first-time founders with tools, resources and a community of practice to support efforts to build sustainable news organizations that reflect the communities they serve.

There are dozens of organizations that serve the needs of journalists in various types of media and from different communities. We are not listing all of those here, but some of those national organizations may also support journalists working in your community.

Guides, Reports & Trainings

NEWS DESERTS

State of Local News Project
(Local News Initiative at Northwestern, ongoing)

The Expanding News Desert
(Penelope Muse Abernathy/UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, 2018)

Losing the News
(PEN, 2019)

LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEMS

How The Lenfest Institute is measuring impact in the Philadelphia Media Ecosystem
(Lenfest Institute for Journalism, 2022)

A Guide for Assessing Your Local News Ecosystem
(Fiona Morgan/Democracy Fund, 2019)

Not just one foundation, not just one newsroom: How the Colorado Media Project is trying to rebuild a local news ecosystem
(Nieman Lab, 2019)

Supporting Local News Through Collaborative Action: A cross-site analysis of five local news and information ecosystem
(Democracy Fund, 2020)

Local news ecosystem mapping: Using databases to build a comprehensive list of local news producers
(Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, 2019)

GUIDES AND REPORTS FOR FUNDERS

The Community Foundation & Local Media Guidebook: A Guide for California Newsrooms and Funders
(Paulette Brown-Hinds, 2022)

Funding Journalism - for Canadian Funders
(Inspirit Foundation, 2023)

Journalism and Philanthropy: Growth, Diversity and Potential Conflicts of Interest
(NORC at the University of Chicago, Media Impact Funders, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, 2023)

EQUITY

[Antiracist Journalism: Creating accountability infrastructure for equitable local news](#)
(CJR, 2023)

[Why We're Updating the Language We Use To Talk About Our Work](#)
(Independence Public Media Foundation)

[The Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs](#)
(Various authors, 2023)

The [Center for Community Media](#), which works with news outlets that serve communities underrepresented in mainstream media, published a new directory of [Asian American and Pacific Islander \(AAPI\) community media](#) and [Black Media Green Book](#) in 2023.

POLICY STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL NEWS

[Building a Stronger Local Media Ecosystem: The Role of Media Policy](#)
(CJR/Tow Center, 2023)

COLLABORATION AND LOCAL NEWS

[How and why journalists and civil society organizations around the world are working together](#)
(Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, 2022)

[How sharing back-office services helps sustain collaborative journalism — and Alaska radio stations](#)
(Lenfest Institute for Journalism, 2022)

Webinar: [So you want to start or fund a collaborative](#)
(Solutions Journalism Network, 2023)

[Collaborative Scaffolding: The Key to Successful Collaborative Journalism](#)
(Tow Center, 2022)

[Strategies for Tracking Impact: A Guide for Collaborative Journalism](#)
(Solutions Journalism Network, 2021)

V. Connect and Share

We hope this guide provided you with a helpful template and examples that you can put into practice in your own community, whether or not you launch an official Press Forward chapter.

Local funders and local journalism leaders must continue to come together, share lessons, identify potential areas of collaboration and reflect on strategies for achieving the ambitious goals of Press Forward.

If you would like to explore launching a Press Forward local chapter in your community or region, please visit pressforward.news/locals for more information and get in touch by emailing hello@pressforward.news.

Photo: Unsplash/Camilo Jimenez