



## 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