

REPORT FOR AMERICA

Local News Philanthropy: Strong Signs of Positive Movement

61% fundraising growth leads 2020 trends of
Report for America Partner Newsrooms



An Initiative of The GroundTruth Project

Executive Summary



Local philanthropy in support of community journalism appears to be growing significantly.

Report for America partnered with 163 newsrooms in 2020, with a dual mission of placing talented journalists in local communities to cover under-covered topics and expanding local journalism philanthropy. The Report for America team of newsrooms and corps members represents a case study in journalism philanthropy. The data reflected in the report illustrates a focused, concerted effort to build newsrooms' capacity to fundraise but may not be indicative of all US newsrooms. We ask that our newsroom partners raise at least a quarter of the reporter's salary from the community, and work with local stakeholders to hit or surpass that target.

What we saw this year is encouraging, especially considering how COVID-19 has taken a toll on newsroom budgets nationwide.

KEY FINDINGS OF 2020

Report for America newsroom partners raised 61% more funding per reporter in 2020 than in 2019, jumping from a \$14,593 average to \$23,500 per reporter. The number of donations to Report for America newsrooms grew from 634 in 2019 to 8,887 in 2020.

In all, Report for America had a \$10 million philanthropic impact on U.S. local news in 2020. The total amount donated to Report for America newsrooms grew from \$861,000 in 2019 to at least \$4.6 million. Report for America matched local newsroom success with its own \$4.6 million in corps member salaries. This is a result of both improvement in newsroom effectiveness and the growth of the overall program (from 53 newsrooms to 163).

The growth is fueled by individual giving as much as institutional giving. Indeed, the fundraising sources for local newsrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Donors, or donor-subscribers, are just as committed as foundations to supporting their local news ecosystem.

Community foundations are becoming more active — and creating new models focused on long-term sustainability. In 2020, 56 foundations contributed to newsrooms through Report for America, an increase of 124% from the contributions of 25 foundations in 2019. Just as importantly, community foundations are becoming increasingly creative in creating structures that can harness interest from the community in the long run.

For-profit newsrooms have accelerated their fundraising efforts but still lag behind nonprofit newsrooms. For-profit newsrooms are becoming more skilled at raising money philanthropically. The average amount raised per for-profit newsroom was \$26,811, and per reporter this number was \$18,825. Though they represented 48% of corps member positions, for-profit newsrooms raised 38.3% of all 2020 Report for America local share funds.

Newsrooms are raising more because they're asking for more. Many newsrooms started fundraising in order to hit the minimum request from Report for America but soon discovered that they could and should ask for more support.

COVID-19 and civil unrest did not disrupt giving to journalism. In fact, giving in some regions increased due to the pandemic. In most cases, COVID-19 undercut advertising revenue but also increased the community's understanding of the importance of local journalism. Those newsrooms that attempted fundraising usually succeeded.

In all, we have come to view philanthropy not as a temporary, nice-to-have form of emergency help, but rather a “third revenue stream.” For-profit news organizations can only survive with some combination of sponsorships or advertising, subscriptions or memberships — and a third revenue source consisting of philanthropic support from the community.

Findings and Lessons Learned



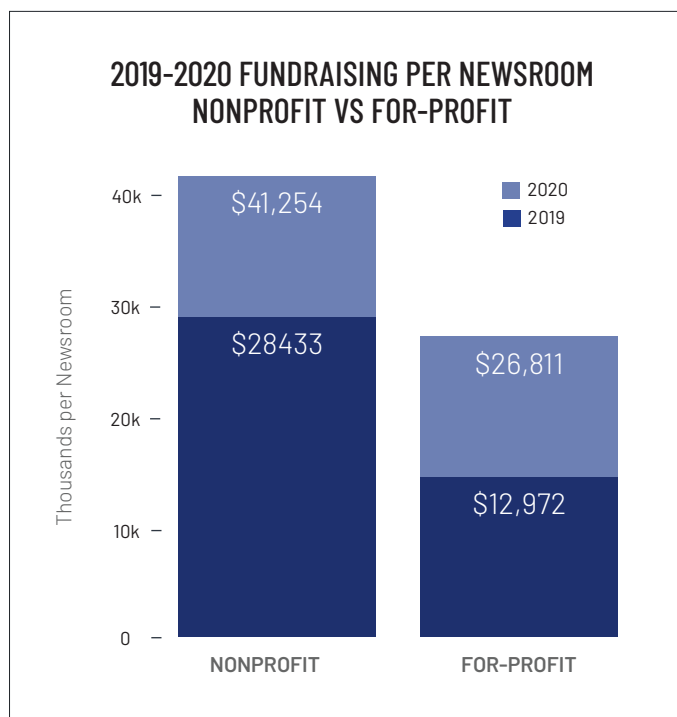
Report for America, an initiative of The GroundTruth Project, partners with all types of local newsrooms. Of the 163 newsrooms in 2020, slightly more than half were nonprofit operations.

For-profit operations in the U.S. already facing overwhelming challenges, saw substantial revenue drops in 2020 due to COVID-19. In that year, 60 newsrooms closed entirely, according to the Journalism Crisis Project at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. More than 1,400 newsrooms laid off staff, 996 reduced employee pay, and 180 changed their print frequency. There were an additional seven buyouts and three voluntary buyouts. All of this is in addition to nearly 1,500 newsrooms furloughing staff with the potential for layoffs.

For many of Report for America's 80 for-profit newsroom partners, this is their first time raising money for journalism. The Report for America program has become an on-ramp. Our program's requirement to fundraise part of the cost of the corps member thrusts newsroom leaders into the action of asking for philanthropic support and educating their key community stakeholders on the role of local news and the impact of its disintegration.

Some 70.4% of Report for America newsrooms raised the minimum share in 2020 — and 46.7% went beyond the minimum to raise 100% or more of their local share. The Report for America Local Sustainability team supports newsrooms via:

- Coaching newsrooms on the art of fundraising, providing materials to support their pitch conversations, sculpting initial conversations and more. These are nuanced conversations, with funders eager to key in on mission alignment, diversity and sustainability. It's much more than just asking for a donation, and it's vital that new operations grow this skill.
- Deploying a key digital crowdfunding tool that enables successful online fundraising and tracking of donors. Many organizations have loyal donors potentially resting in vast email lists. These citizens are often already invested in the news franchise. Reaching them in the right way and bringing them deeper into the organization can pay long-term dividends.
- Serving as a fiscal sponsor to for-profit newsrooms for dollars generated from local donors. Thousands of dollars from large donors are available to many newsrooms, but are deliverable only to a nonprofit organization. Our for-profit partners don't now—and may never—have this designation to access critical funds.



Report for America's nonprofit newsrooms include both well established public radio and TV stations and newer, digital-only nonprofits. For those, Report for America provides an extremely useful hook — a way of conveying to donors how their support can lead to specific improvements in critically important local reporting.

Donors often respond when their contributions serve as match dollars from another source. Report for America's \$25,000 maximum grant toward half the salary of a reporter is that match vehicle in local markets. It has enabled newsrooms to increase the size of their philanthropic appeals, in part because donors are drawn to the systems change model that Report for America provides. For example:

Becky Meiers of KCAW Raven Radio reports that Report for America's partnership helped her station increase the number of major donors by 85% from 2019 to 2020.

Lance Knobel represents the heart of emerging nonprofit news operations with his Cityside and Berkleyside publications. Two donors joined forces to pledge \$85,000 for the next two years of his Report for America Corp members.

"We've found that our donors connect in an almost visceral way with the mission of Report for America. They understand the deep need for more reporting resources, particularly directed to under-covered beats. And they're thrilled to be able to help support in a direct way an early-career journalist," said Knobel.

Another important facet of Report for America's service is access to diverse talent. A nationwide recruiting effort from Report for America generates thousands of applications for the news industry and nonprofit organizations, including critically-needed journalists of color. In 2020, 42% of reporter placements through the program were for journalists of color — double what you might find in your average local newsroom.

From the perspective of both Report for America newsrooms and the local news landscape at large, we are seeing these major trends:

Newsrooms raised 61% more per reporter in 2020 than in 2019.

The total amount raised by Report for America newsrooms jumped 436% from 2019 to 2020, from \$861,000 to \$4,616,059. Some of that growth reflected an increase in the number of newsrooms actively fundraising, from 50 in 2019 to 178 now.

But, significantly, it also reflects a dramatic improvement in fundraising effectiveness. More newsrooms worked hard to raise funds, and more succeeded. Report for America newsroom fundraising averages increased from \$16,882 per newsroom to \$34,193, and \$14,593 per corps member to \$23,551.

The number of donors to Report for America partner newsrooms grew from 634 to 8,887, six times what would have been expected in a linear growth model based on corps size. Some 70.4% of partner newsrooms met or exceeded their fundraising requirement of raising at least a quarter of the reporter salary.

Newsroom leaders earned success when they spent time and invested in fundraising tools. Some used Report for America fundraising templates and tips to energize their efforts, as in the case of Julie Makinen, executive editor of the Desert Sun. “Partnering with Report for America gave us a way to test our community’s willingness to support local journalism with philanthropic dollars,” said Makinen. “It would have been hard to leap in without some structure. Report for America provided a model for our efforts, and gave our partners in the new foundation the confidence that it would work.”

Fifty-five newsrooms leveraged Report for America, and its parent organization, The GroundTruth Project, as a fiscal sponsor to offer donors an easy way to make a tax-deductible, charitable gift to a community-driven, for-profit news organization. Those newsrooms that used Report for America as a fiscal sponsor raised \$1,769,531 from 4,823 donors.

Many spent more time on this critical sustainability task than they have in the past. On average, newsrooms

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Julie Makinen,
Executive Editor, Desert Sun

reported dedicating 8 hours per week to fundraising, with an average 1.5 staff members taking part in the work.

Some hired their first professional development specialists. The North and South Carolina operations of McClatchy, for example, added full-time development professional Adam Waxman to the team in 2020. Charged with assisting eight newspapers, Waxman said his deeper background in the fundraising field allowed the newsrooms to immediately utilize tools and tactics they otherwise would not have known about. As an example, time expended in seeking \$5,000 to \$10,000 grants is largely the same time expended seeking grants at \$50,000 and above.

Other newsrooms increased their staffing as well. The Berkshire Eagle in Pittsfield, Mass., and the Daily Herald in Everett, Wa. committed to their first development hires in 2020. In February 2021, the Miami Herald in Miami, Fla., and the Kansas City Star announced plans to hire their first journalism development staff.

Nonprofit news organizations also increased their efforts, although in their case the significance of

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Report for America has accelerated our growth in ways that are difficult to comprehend. Our newsroom is growing, our journalists are thriving and we're excited about the future of this industry.



Dan Dinsmore,
Executive Editor, Maine Monitor

the Report for America partnership was different. Report for America has been a game-changer for the Maine Monitor, the state's only nonprofit, nonpartisan newsroom. Since receiving their first corps member in 2019, the publication has grown its audience by 1,400 percent, doubled its revenue and increased its staff from 1 to 6. Explains Dan Dinsmore, the executive director:

“Report for America has accelerated our growth in ways that are difficult to comprehend. Our newsroom is growing, our journalists are thriving and we're excited about the future of this industry. Thanks to Report for America's support, we have been able to find local funders for two of our three positions and have positioned our brand quite favorably in the eyes of Maine-based funders. Report for America's presence has helped them understand the civic news movement.”

Public radio stations already have well-practiced development arms. But with Report for America, many benefit from having an appealing new vessel for donors. Ellen Oost from WFPL, Louisville: “The Report for America reporters definitely provide a new way to seek additional funds from folks who might not support us otherwise (or at that level) since they can “restrict” it to a particular ‘project.’”

At CT Public, the public radio and TV organization in Hartford, Connecticut, they highlighted the work of Report for America reporters Brenda Leon and Ali Oshinkie in donor proposals during pledge periods, in newsletters and in emails. “The Report for America program provides an opportunity to broaden our coverage throughout the state and is an important part of our fundraising case,” said Liz Dupont-Diehl, CT Public's grants and proposals manager. “We include the Report for America program and the work of our Report for America reporters, Brenda Leon and Ali Oshinskie, and have a dedicated web page to the program.”

Flint Beat, a digital-only nonprofit in Michigan, has a Report for America photographer, KT Kanazawich. Flint Beat CEO Jiquanda Johnson said her community literally seeing themselves in a positive light via this work has resulted in stronger fundraising: “In 2020, we raised more money than we ever have. I would like to think that it was a combination of efforts in our newsroom, including being able to have better story packages for our work. KT plays a vital role in this. The first time someone called me and complimented

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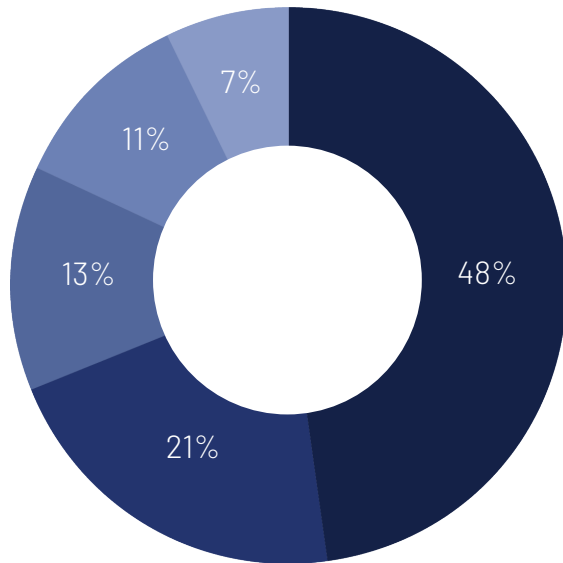
In 2020, we raised more money than we ever have. I would like to think that it was a combination of efforts in our newsroom, including being able to have better story packages for our work. KT plays a vital role in this. The first time someone called me and complimented my team, they mentioned her by name. That speaks volumes because Flint can be a tough city to crack.



Jiquanda Johnson,
CEO, Flint Beat

2020 DOLLAR SOURCES FOR DONATIONS TO REPORT FOR AMERICA NEWSROOMS

■ Individual Donors
 ■ Non-Family Private Foundations
 ■ Corporate Giving or Corporate Foundations



my team, they mentioned her by name. That speaks volumes because Flint can be a tough city to crack.”

Encouragingly, this growth is made up more of individual giving than institutional giving.

Individual donors giving under \$5,000 contributed 6,774 gifts, averaging \$68, to our partner newsrooms through Report for America, compared to 984 gifts averaging \$54 in 2019.

Small-donor giving gradually builds a reliable revenue source and is vital to a newsroom donor ecosystem.

- Even if small dollars at first, they are donors very likely to give again.
- Major donors with a bigger giving capacity are often in this funder mix exploring the initiative.
- Among the individual donors are many who have not given to journalism before.

More than half of the donations that have come in are from people who haven't previously done so. These efforts give community members an opportunity to step up and actively participate in restoring local news in their neighborhood or increasing coverage on a particular topic, continuing to build accountability and trust with local media at a grassroots level.

Campaigns to boost individual giving have included:

The Willamette Week is an influential local news source in Portland, Oregon. When Covid struck, and the feisty weekly's advertising base was shattered, the team reached out to their readers for support. In one week of outreach, more than 1,000 donors contributed more than \$30,000. Latisha Jensen was Willamette's Report for America reporter in 2020, covering the city's East Side.

In Salt Lake City, the Tribune has been a pioneer in forging stronger connections with local donors since it converted to nonprofit status in 2019. In one 12-month window (September 2019 to July 2020), the Tribune team twice went to individual donors via an email campaign, raising \$30,000 each time. The messages in the emails profiled their two Report for America reporters, Becky Jacobs and Zak Podmore.

Newsrooms that succeed in individual fundraising efforts generally operate efficiently at these three tasks:

1. They develop a viable email database of citizens who care about local news;
2. They craft compelling pitches to those citizens about journalism, impact and need;
3. They steward those donors with special events and general outreach to keep them attached to their investment.

This general community outpouring was shown at the News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C. — where more than \$60,000 in individual donations arrived.

“Accurate knowledge of events encourages civic engagement,” wrote Janice Woychik with her \$120

donation. Richard Wayland donated \$150 and included these words: “I believe in the importance of journalism and the free press. We need you all and thank you for what you do!”

“The continuation of N&O is vital for the state of NC, our region, and for me and my family,” wrote Carol McFayden with her \$15 donation. “The reporting you do allows our society to function. Particularly in this time of crises, we need you in order to remain a free and educated populace.”

The same sentiments echoed in the mountains of Massachusetts, at the Berkshire Eagle. Positioned between Albany and Boston, the Eagle reached out to readers for support above what they already pay. The Eagle team was not expecting to raise much — then \$46,000 came in from individual donors.

“I believe in strong, local journalism and I am proud of the Eagle,” wrote Barbara Viniar with her \$50 donation. Laura Rosenthal donated \$100, writing, “Local newspapers help keep our communities strong. Keep flying, Eagle!”

Community foundations are becoming more active — and created new models in 2020 focused on long term sustainability.

Overall, in 2020, 56 foundations contributed to newsrooms through Report for America, a 124% increase from the contributions of 25 foundations in 2019.

One of the most notable trends is community foundations creating structures designed to make philanthropic support broader and more enduring. In all, we are aware of at least 10 cases nationally in which community foundations have now set up special funds to attract and manage support for local journalism over the long term.

Our partner newsrooms received 64 grants for a total of \$1,327,414 in 2020, mostly through community foundations. In 2019, \$326,000 was received.

The Central Valley Community Foundation established

the Impact Media and Measurement Fund to help the Fresno Bee and other journalism projects. It provides a central fund to which individuals and other institutions can donate in support of local journalism. As of January 2021, this partnership has supported efforts to secure nearly \$1.6 million. The target is to have \$3 million raised by the end of 2022. The first of the funded journalists joined in December 2019. By February 2021, there will be 11 journalists funded and onboarded as a result of these efforts. They will target topics like education, poverty, equity, diverse communities, land use, housing, food insecurity and environment.

In Palm Springs, California, civic leaders created the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation. The new foundation’s mission is to serve many journalism needs in the community. Its first success in 2021 is \$60,000 in funding to retain the Desert Sun’s opinions page editor, recently eliminated. Earlier in 2020, the newsroom raised \$50,000 to support an internship program with the local community college. “Report for America provided a model for our efforts, and gave our partners in the new foundation the confidence that it would work,” said editor Julie Makinen.

The leading community foundation in Traverse City, Mich., is an active partner in fundraising and plans to set up a local journalism fund with a goal to raise \$300,000, especially for initiatives by the Record-Eagle.

In Washington state, the Community Foundation of Snohomish County established a new fund to support investigative journalists, with a \$250,000 goal to fund investigative reporting at The Daily Herald in Everett, Wash. The partnership has a longer-term goal of raising \$550,000 to establish a trust, in order to retain at least one full-time investigative reporter.

In Georgia, the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley started recruiting funds for local journalism. The CFCV invested \$40,000 in the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer’s first Report for America reporters in 2020 and is actively recruiting more philanthropy for journalism.

In Virginia, concerned citizens created the Foothills Forum six years ago to create its own long-form news

vertical of the Rappahannock News. It fundraises \$140,000 annually from more than 200 local donors to pay for its four journalists and also contributes to supporting the News' Report for America journalist.

Foundation-newsroom partnerships are growing in 2021. The Advocate in Louisiana is partnered with the Greater New Orleans Foundation to raise \$1.5 million in three years for watchdog reporting. The foundation has a role in getting introductory funder and community interest pointed toward this initiative.

More foundation-newsroom partnerships are in the incubator stages, and are expected to emerge in 2021, including in: San Luis Obispo, Calif., Biloxi, MS., Charlotte, N.C., and Tacoma, Wa.

Our for-profit newsroom partners have accelerated their fundraising.

For-profit newsrooms raised \$1,769,531 in 2020. Per newsroom, the average amount raised for for-profits was \$26,811, and per reporter this number was \$18,825.

Though they represented 48% of the corps member positions, for-profit newsrooms raised 38.3% of all 2020 Report for America Local Share funds.

Of the newsrooms that did successfully fundraise:

- 9.1% raised the entire value of their corps members' salaries;
- 37.9% raised the half-of-the-reporter's-salary not covered by the Report for America subsidy;
- 57.6% raised the 25% minimum fundraising requirement for participation in the cohort.

In 2020, there were 22 Report for America for-profit newsroom partners that raised under \$5,000 – or 33.3% of the cohort. That dollar amount falls short of the 25% share we ask of local partners. Half of those newsrooms were unable to raise any money at all.

The key challenge reported from nearly all underperforming Report for America newsrooms is lack of time. In these newsrooms, there is not a lack of

interest in or recognition of philanthropy's impact. Too many newsrooms found it impossible in 2020's unprecedented news and revenue year to peel away from news to have key donor conversations.

The Berkshire Eagle in Massachusetts also set up a model geared toward long-term sustainability. The Eagle was bought from a chain in 2016 by four retirees who had grown tired of the paper's decline under chain ownership. In 2020, they raised \$46,000 from the community to support their Report for America staffer – Daniel Jin, covering legislative issues in rural western Massachusetts. From that success came the decision to build something for the long run – a \$400,000 local fund called the Berkshire Eagle Local Journalism Initiative. The dollars will be targeted for coverage of education, health, economic development, arts and culture. They will even hire a development manager to further the efforts of publisher Fred Rutberg, who credits this landmark year to their decision to partner with Report for America. "Between slim and none was our philanthropic life before Report for America," said Rutberg. "I had been thinking about it. But it wasn't going anywhere. When Report for America presented itself, it proved the concept

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We believe that the Coronavirus Recovery beat that 'our' reporter and photojournalist will cover will tell one of our community's most important stories, at a time when access to trusted local information will be more critical than ever.



Betsy Covington,
President and CEO,
Community Foundation of
Chattahoochee Valley

real fast. There is a new appetite in the community to support our efforts due to Report for America.”

Despite the progress of for-profit newsrooms, nonprofit organizations are still more successful at raising philanthropic dollars. Though they represented 52% of the corps member positions, nonprofit newsrooms raised 61.7% of all 2020 Report for America Local Share funds.

In 2020, nonprofit newsrooms raised \$2,846,528, and more than 90% reported using Report for America as part of their fundraising pitch.

Nonprofit newsrooms are unique; they often fundraise to cover the entirety of their costs. For the purposes of Report for America’s metrics, and with a reasonable level of certainty from self-reporting, the following numbers reflect the amounts raised by nonprofit newsrooms in campaigns specifically highlighting Report for America.

The average amount raised per nonprofit newsroom was \$41,254, and \$27,907 per reporter. As a result:

- 21.7% raised the entire value of their corps members’ salaries. This is, on average, four times what we ask each newsroom to raise as a minimum requirement.
- 55.1% raised the amount not covered by the Report for America subsidy.
- 82.6% raised the minimum fundraising requirement for participation in the cohort. On average, nonprofit newsrooms raised 260% of the minimum fundraising requirement for participation in the cohort.

Newsrooms are raising more because they’re asking for more.

The Report for America program requires newsrooms to fundraise a minimum of 25% of the corp member’s salary. That typically amounts to between \$7,000 and \$12,000, depending on the final salary set by the newsroom.

That 25% ask amount is where many for-profit news-

rooms enter philanthropy. But Report for America’s coaching of these newsrooms aims to raise 100% of all local costs — often surpassing \$30,000 per corp member in nearly all situations.

In 2020, The Kansas City Star secured the biggest single grant in the history of a local newsroom with Report for America. Greg Farmer, the managing editor of the Star, helped win a \$250,000 grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health to fund three reporters for two years. This came at a time when many newsrooms were still getting comfortable with asking for \$10,000 and \$20,000. In analyzing the grant success, Farmer simply said: “Journalists have to aim higher. Our work is valuable and we have to be willing to ask for what we need to actually fund the journalism that we want to do.” Report for America was his catalyst for philanthropy: “The relationship between us and Report for America was crucial in securing that \$250,000 in funding.”

The Mountain State Spotlight was born in 2020 from the fallout of layoffs of longtime staffers at a West Virginia newspaper. Three co-workers forecasted the impending cut-backs and structured a loose idea of what they would do when the first layoff occurred. Report for America reached out to American Journalism Project, and the Spotlight was born almost in a single weekend. The efforts of three groups resulted in a \$286,250 fundraiser in 2020 for the Mountain State.

When the Record-Eagle, in Traverse City, Michigan began its Report for America partnership in 2020, a retired staffer started a GoFundMe campaign that launched the first philanthropic effort for the paper. With this new community awareness, a leader at the community foundation reached out to the newsroom to start recruiting major gift donors into a single fund. Editor Nate Payne suggested a modest goal of \$20,000 total. The foundation official dismissed that with, “We can raise that in a couple hours.” So they set their sights on a more robust \$300,000 plan: 10 donors at \$10,000 each — renewable for three years.

Phil O’Connor, editor of The Daily Herald in Everett, Washington, believed that it might be the end of the newspaper when Covid struck — and they hadn’t

Phil O'Connor, editor of The Daily Herald in Everett, Washington, believed that it might be the end of the newspaper when Covid struck — and they hadn't even hired their Report for America reporter yet. Challenged by the pandemic and motivated by the Report for America program, the Daily Herald team buckled down. By year's end, they generated more than \$250,000 in philanthropy from one large gift, individual donors and a corporate ad sponsor program. Their 2021 goal includes the hiring of the newspaper's first development staffer.



even hired their Report for America reporter yet. Challenged by the pandemic and motivated by the Report for America program, the Daily Herald team buckled down. By year's end, they generated more than \$250,000 in philanthropy from one large gift, individual donors and a corporate ad sponsor program. Their 2021 goal includes the hiring of the newspaper's first development staffer.

COVID-19 and civil unrest did not disrupt giving to journalism. In the case of Covid, giving in some regions increased due to the pandemic.

Like the rest of the world, COVID-19 struck the Report for America program with force — impacting the 2020 program year just as newsrooms were making final reporter selections. The economic peril to newsrooms prompted several to drop out. But in many Report for

America cities, the coronavirus crisis highlighted the need for local information. In places that had active fundraising campaigns, journalism philanthropy actually flourished, with institutional giving and everyday citizen donations responding to the need for critical and timely news due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 ignited the first journalism donations from The Community Foundation of Chattahoochee Valley in Columbus, Ga, an organization that had attended the Knight Media Forum for 10 years but hadn't yet supported journalism. In 2020, the foundation learned of Report for America placing a journalist at the Columbus Ledger-Inquirer to cover COVID-19 and health care. The foundation committed \$80,000. "We believe that the Coronavirus Recovery beat that 'our' reporter and photojournalist will cover will tell one of our community's most important stories, at a time when access to trusted local information will be more critical than ever," said Betsy Covington, president and CEO of CFCV.

Marian Kaanon of the Stanislaus Community Foundation found herself defending to her board and peers her reasons for funding the Report for America program — and a reporter covering public health — at the McClatchy-owned Modesto Bee in June 2019.

When COVID-19 hit, it became clear how valuable this reporter, ChrisAnna Mink, could be — especially since she was a former pediatrician and expert on infectious diseases. Kaanon wrote on Facebook: "We raised eyebrows last year when [we] decided to co-fund a Modesto Bee reporter. But in the last few days, I've been grateful for ChrisAnna Mink's coverage. I hope we remember, when this public health crisis lessens, the importance of local journalism, just like supporting local business."

Citizen donors were as bullish on funding journalism amid COVID-19. In the immediate weeks after the onset of the pandemic — from March 15 to May 15 — \$309,507 from 2,409 donations flowed into Report for America newsrooms through fund-raising campaigns around the country. From March 15 to the end of 2020, \$625,705 arrived from 6,134 donations.

In Salt Lake City, a July email campaign drew \$45,000 for Report for America Corps members. More striking about this raise is that it was the newsroom's third ask within 12 months. But amid a pandemic, the drive exceeded Salt Lake's goal.

What Report for America has learned about what works best:

Fixing local news is a matter of more boots on the ground. So too is the fix for funding local news: More specialists with more resources must be dedicated to raising journalism philanthropy.

Before even getting newsroom leaders to successfully take donation-seeking steps, Report for America's first priority is often just building the confidence and awareness in the newsrooms' top editors that this activity must be done by them, and that they can succeed.

Report for America staff also worked with local foundation leaders to explain how they can be effective in their support. These foundations typically know their local news has changed and, though unhappy about the shift, are often unaware of the financial impact on local news caused by the power of tech giants and other digital media, or how they can confront it. They are aware and suspicious of national chain ownerships, and concerned about hedge-fund ownership.

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Marian Kaanon,
Stanislaus Community
Foundation

They often view Report for America as a neutral third party that provides a low-cost and high-quality way of supporting local news without just writing a check to a legacy news organization or spending large sums to start a new nonprofit entity. With Report for America, they are able to compete in this new climate.

REPORT FOR AMERICA'S THREE-PERSON LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY TEAM FOUND 2020 SUCCESS IN THESE AREAS:

- More outreach and communications with local newsrooms in the form of webinars, toolkits and best practices sharing. The six webinars were a key introduction in 2020 for both mission and mechanics, as more than 200 industry leaders attended or followed up later for video access.
- Deployment of a key crowdfunding tool by local newsrooms to raise funds from individual donors and simultaneously use those campaigns as publicity platforms in the community. In 2020, 61 partner newsrooms received donations through our crowdfunding platform, raising a total of \$333,841 from 5,743 donations.
- Guidance and procedures on approaching institutional and major gift donors for five-figure and multi-year approaches.

Conclusion

The landscape is shifting. As Americans are becoming more aware of the importance of local news, they seek to expand their interest by investing in it.

Local newsrooms are adapting by realizing that they need to enlist the support of the community through philanthropy.

The pleasant surprise for us is that a relatively small intervention – in the form of coaching and providing strategic tools – has had a dramatic impact.

This impact could be even bigger if:

- [Report for America expands its coaching strategy to more newsrooms with more tools](#)

- [More newsrooms, sometimes with the help of philanthropy, invest in hiring full-time staff to focus on local giving](#)
- [A larger segment of American philanthropy embraces the actions of their peers in recognizing the impact on their mission of timely and factual journalism in their communities](#)
- [Report for America creates a web of regional and state fundraising initiatives that unite lead players in philanthropy and journalism](#)

The appetite to help is there. Newsrooms and philanthropic citizens just need the time, understanding and expertise to come together to replant local news in America.

About our Local Sustainability Team



Todd Franko is the Report for America director of local sustainability and development. He joined the team in 2019 after serving as editor of The Vindicator from 2007 until it closed in August 2019. He previously worked in Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska and New York. His last few years at The Vindicator were spent in significant revenue-generating roles. He is based in Youngstown, Ohio and can be reached at tfranko@reportforamerica.org



James Martinez, manager of local sustainability and development, joined Report for America in August 2020 from Texas. He has worked at Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles and Fidelity Charitable Trust in Texas. He also founded Dallas Forward Fund to help social and economic justice programs. He is based in Dallas and can be reached at jmartinez@reportforamerica.org



Amy Bonn, also a manager of sustainability, joined in January 2021. Previously, she was founder and principal of Finch Network, LLC, a community development consulting firm for local, regional and national nonprofits and municipalities. The national service movement has informed and inspired Amy's work since 1994, when she was with AmeriCorps VISTA. She is based in Plattsburgh, N.Y. and can be reached at abonn@reportforamerica.org

Interested in helping us grow our local sustainability impact?

Contact Lauren McKown, VP of Development and Communications, and Todd Franko, Director of Local Sustainability at lmckown@thegroundtruthproject.org and tfranko@reportforamerica.org.