PARTNER NEWSROOMS RAISE NEARLY $1M IN LOCAL PHILANTHROPY

Lessons from Report for America's 2019 efforts to help local newsrooms with long-term sustainability

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Heading into 2020, there is great optimism that local philanthropy is awakening to the need to support community journalism.

As part of its model, Report for America, an initiative of the GroundTruth Project, asks its host newsrooms to experiment with local sustainability by fundraising from the community to support the salary of their corps member. The program works hand-in-hand with local newsrooms to help them with the task.

We can now report the results for 2019: Report for America’s 52 local newsroom partners leveraged their investment from our national service program to raise more than $800,000 through more than 1,150 donations — quadruple our goal. In all, 75 percent of the newsrooms raised money to support their Report for America corps member.

This total includes a number of for-profit entities with little experience engaging with community philanthropy. Approximately 47 percent of the 2019 Report for America newsrooms are for-profit entities; 53 percent are nonprofits.

Some public radio stations and other news organizations also raised community funding toward Report for America corps member salaries as a part of their standard, annual fundraising campaigns. With those donations included, Report for America’s local newsrooms raised nearly $1 million to support the journalists in 2019.

Among the lessons we can now draw from our 2019 experience:

- Local news organizations can raise meaningful philanthropic dollars
- Journalists themselves can be a newsroom’s best revenue catalysts
- Good journalism itself is a fundraising tool
- Many potential donors still don’t know just how much local news is struggling, but when they learn it, many respond

This paper will also offer some case studies which provide potential models for other newsrooms.

PROGRESS SO FAR

Report for America is a national service program that places talented emerging journalists into local newsrooms to report on under-covered topics and communities. The program promotes shared investment: in the first year, Report for America typically pays about half of the reporter’s salary. The newsroom is responsible for the other half. Of that local cost, we ask them to fundraise half of the amount. The hope is that in helping newsrooms raise money from local philanthropy, it will enlarge what a
community spends on journalism — and ultimately ensure that these reporting positions live on for many years.

Report for America increased its profile in 2019 to actively help local newsrooms raise local funds. We hired Todd Franko to be the Director of Local Development and Sustainability. Franko has a unique experience with the collapse of local journalism, having been the final editor of The Vindicator in Youngstown, Ohio. The Vindy, as it was known for 150 years, closed on Aug. 31, making Youngstown one of America’s largest cities without a daily newspaper.

The Report for America team has been working with local newsrooms since then, providing advice, marketing materials, and fiscal sponsorship. One newspaper editor called Report for America their fundraising therapist. In addition, we have engaged the News Revenue Hub, the respected organization that specializes in helping local newsrooms develop membership-based revenue models.

The newsrooms have tried a variety of approaches — including working with local community foundations, running direct email campaigns, and engaging high net-worth individuals.

In total, the 37 newsrooms raised more than $800,000 through 1,150 donations — quadruple our goal. In all, 75 percent of the newsrooms raised money to support their Report for America journalist.

Some public radio stations and other news organizations also raised community funding toward Report for America corps member salaries as a part of their standard, annual fundraising campaigns. When those donations are added in, the total amount of local funding for these journalists grows larger: Report for America newsrooms raised nearly $1 million in 2019 to support local journalists.

Community foundations were the single largest source of Report for America newsroom’s local support. The place-based funders that supported Report for America journalists formed a web of funder engagement across America, including:

- Asian Pacific Community Fund
- Barnstable County License Plates Grants
- Betterment Fund of Maine
- Blue Grass Community Foundation
- Desert Hot Springs Historical Society
- Fertel Foundation
- Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation
- Hartford Community Foundation
- Hudson-Webber Foundation
- Innovia Foundation
- Irvine Foundation
- Jonathan Logan Family Foundation
- Joyce Foundation
- McCune Charitable Foundation
- Newman’s Own Foundation
- New Mexico Local News Lab
- North Carolina Community Foundation
- North Valley Community Foundation
- Stanislaus Community Foundation
- Stanislaus Office of Education
- Ruth U. Fertel Foundation
- Sierra Health Foundation
- The Meadows Foundation
- Wyoming Community Foundation
- Vital Projects Fund
The largest number of donations were smaller contributions, often generated through direct mail or public appeals. Public radio stations that raised money for local reporters through public appeals included Yellowstone Public Radio, St. Louis Public Radio, Minnesota Public Broadcasting, West Virginia Public Broadcasting, WPLN Nashville, WCAI Cape Cod, Boise State Public Radio, Wyoming Public Radio and KUER Salt Lake City.


The stories of success come from all across the country. In Salt Lake City, as the Tribune waited for IRS approval to convert to a nonprofit, it launched a crowdfunding effort for one of their two Report for America beats. In five weeks, $32,000 arrived from readers.

In Maine, Dan Dinsmore was a one-person newsroom at The Maine Center for Public Interest Reporting. His first full-timer was a Report for America reporter. A single donor covered Dan’s costs before the reporter even arrived. He is confident that next donors are lined up after this start.

At Boise State Public Radio, they launched into their term with a crowdfund effort they called “Rachel Reports for America” to welcome their reporter, Rachel Cohen. They had 420 donors contribute $54,000.

LESSONS LEARNED

The local sustainability component of Report for America is an opportunity for our partner newsrooms to experiment with and learn from new approaches, especially philanthropic models, of garnering support for the important journalism they do. Many of our partner newsrooms are completely new to fundraising (53% of our fundraising newsrooms are for-profits experimenting beyond traditional revenue models), while some, like our public radio colleagues, are fundraising veterans.

So a year into this experiment, what are we learning together about local news organizations fundraising to support community journalism?
**LOCAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS CAN RAISE MEANINGFUL PHILANTHROPIC DOLLARS.**

One of the first leaps newsroom leaders have to contend with is their own apprehension: “Will people and institutions donate to journalism?” The thinking goes: Philanthropy supports education, health and the arts. Can local journalism resonate like the above cases? The answer: Yes. Across America and to a 2019 total over $800,000, local philanthropy responded to journalism needs in communities.

**FUNDING ARRIVES FROM A DIVERSE DONOR COMMUNITY.**

Donors responded in 2019 to Report for America partner newsrooms from all corners of the donor community. Place-based foundations are critical leaders in small and large philanthropy. From Maine to Modesto, place-based foundations rallied to fund local journalism needs. Journalism’s decline is not lost on everyday citizens either. Other newsrooms successfully recruited small donors from local citizens. The $10 donor and the $10,000 donor shared with us the same concerns: journalism is key to a vibrant democracy and to robust civic engagement. “We need journalists and we need a free press” said a Berkshire, Mass. donor. “I am concerned about the assault on news media in general and the need for excellent local reporting” said an Arlington Heights, Ill., reader. More such comments are at the close of this report.

**TELLING A GOOD STORY MATTERS, NO MATTER WHERE YOU TELL IT.**

Our newsrooms are raising dollars from snail mail, email campaigns, events, coffees with local boosters, house ads, and more. But what ties together their success is that they are all telling a compelling and highly localized story about what’s at stake if local news is lost, and what’s to gain when they give to support a free press. They’re making the story urgent, making it personal, and making it easy and appealing to take action today.

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Wanted you to know that we got word that we received this grant -- $10k. Thanks so much for flagging it and sending it along. Hooray!

- Steve Junker
Many potential donors still don’t know just how much local news is struggling.

We’re seeing that despite the countless headlines about layoffs and news deserts, many readers or community boosters are surprised to find out how badly their local news source may need their help. More still don’t understand much about how revenue models have changed, or simply haven’t been asked to consider giving. Sharing these stories candidly and openly, telling those readers just what you’re up against can mobilize a new community to give.

The “matching” formula can be effective.

Many donors who gave to Report for America newsrooms cited our matching formula as part of their reason for giving (highly leveraged support), while others enjoyed giving to something that was part of a broader national movement. But a local touch was key. Many of our online donors would cite a specific reporter whose work they admired, or a topic in their community they appreciated receiving coverage. The annual NewsMatch campaign — which some of our partners participated in — organized by the Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund, and others, has seen similar success.

The local news itself is a fundraising tool.

Many of our newsrooms had success in sending appeals, or receiving meaningful gifts just after a big investigation or story dropped from their Report for America corps member. A breaking story is an ideal time to remind your community of the value you provide, and a nudge that if they appreciate that value, they might consider supporting it directly. This might be through a direct appeal, in a subtle reminder and donation link at the bottom of a story, or both.
THE JOURNALIST CAN BE THE REVENUE CATALYST.

In this new era of journalism funding, a media group’s best presenter to the funding source is not necessarily the ad rep or marketing person. It is often the journalist. They know best the value and impact of journalism. They have the ability to tabulate what has been lost and the long-term effect. They are also often the best storytellers within an organization — more conscience than commerce in their approach. Of course, that doesn’t make the role of the journalist asking for money an easy or immediate transition. However, the transition is happening. A New England editor was so moved and motivated by the Report for America process, that while crafting funder asks for his corps member, he created asks for other needs in his newsroom. He intends to present those after he secures his Report for America local match.

CASE STUDIES: APPROACHES TO LOCAL FUNDRAISING

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

1. EMAIL FUNDRAISING CAN BE SUCCESSFUL.

The Salt Lake Tribune had a significant year in many ways in 2019 in terms of nonprofit journalism activity. Their Vice President of Business Innovation, Fraser Nelson, joked in the fall that their fundraising effort for the Report for America reporters is a warm-up for the big mission they now have as a nonprofit newspaper.

The Tribune raised funds for their two Report for America reporters by deploying a concerted email campaign. Guidance from our partner, News Revenue Hub, aided their steps.

Two separate campaigns were launched - one in September and one in mid-November. Each campaign was for a distinct Report for America reporter and not Report for America in general or them as a pair.

Each campaign consisted of weekly emails over a 5-week window. Each highlighted the reporter, specific stories and outcomes, and the overall issues of Utah news deserts. This campaign raised more than $50,000.

In the first campaign, Salt Lake sent out four emails that solicited funds and then one thank-you email.
Here are the email subject lines and the data for just the September/San Juan County beat:

- Email #1 — You can power our reporting from San Juan County
  34.5% open / 1.5% click / $8,387 raised
- Email #2 — Good news for Utah
  41.2% open / .6% click / $5,139 raised
- Email #3 — When we’re at our best
  37.3% open / .5% click / $2,663 raised
- Email #4 — This is it. We need you now.
  35.1% open / 1.6% click / $12,309 raised
- Email #5 — Thank you for your incredible support
  37.3% open / .1% click / $$ n/a

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

2. DONORS CAN RESPOND IN BIG WAYS TO BIG STORIES.

Fundraising can be impacted by capitalizing on the right thing at the right time — even the right news story.

The Cincinnati Enquirer newsroom was new to Report for America in 2019. Like many newsrooms, local fundraising was not a practiced muscle in their great operations. They were growing into a fundraising routine.

One day, their news routine produced a great story from their Report for America corps member, Julia Fair. A tagline appears at the end of Report for America reporters’ stories and points out the Report for America donation function.

Two readers engaged the function — donating $5,000 each.

In that one story, Cincinnati raised their $10,000 local share. The action excited the newsroom to share the story to engage more community support.

More importantly, it catalyzed newsroom leaders at a time when they were getting their feet under them.
THE Modesto Bee

3. IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T SUCCEED, TRY AGAIN.

Modesto, a fine McClatchy news operation, is doubling down in 2020 on local donor efforts after initial success with Report For America fundraising in 2019. But it didn’t start out completely successful.

Editor Brian Clark had never been on a fundraising call. He went to his first one with his publisher. Two presenters were better than one, they reasoned. When they left that first call, the publisher — from a sales background — called it: They were not getting money from that visit. He read the room’s body language. Indeed, their first ask for donor support failed. Undaunted, they went on two more calls. Brian felt their game got better for the chat with Funder No. 2. It also helped that Funder No. 2 had a journalism fan and lifelong newspaper reader. Brian had a good relationship with that foundation’s leader through years of news events. They had lunch before the official presentation to discuss Report for America and donor-funded journalism. The foundation boss advised Brian that a two-year, $28,000 funding ask will be more appealing to the foundation board than just one year for $14,000. It was approved in two weeks.

...Fairly covering donors is akin to covering advertisers: tricky, but possible

Brian and the publisher approached Funder No. 3 with the same two-year, $28,000 ask and were successful in that ask. Not long into the funding, the newspaper wrote an editorial that was critical of an event that included Funder No. 3.

Funder No. 3 was on the phone immediately the next day. It was a tense discussion about the editorial. Brian said the topic of Report for America funding arose in passing. But there was no direct threat of pulling funding. Yet, it was clearly in the back of Brian’s mind. Modesto briefly discussed if it might be necessary to end the partnership. Brian let the dust settle and neither side pushed the issue further. A couple months later, he had a chance encounter with Funder No. 3 at a social. Brian initiated a conversation simply asking: “About us - we’re OK, right?” The funder said, yes, they were OK, and the partnership continues.

Brian’s takeaways from first steps into fundraising:
• Funder conversations work best in person; not letters. Two representatives are better than one.
• Find your cheerleaders in town and gain their support.
• When it gets sticky, as in Donor No. 3, it’s not much different than an angry advertiser, he said. In the donor situation, with the funding having already been publicly celebrated, pulling out of the program was a risk.
4. SMALL, LOCAL JOURNALISM EFFORTS CAN DRAW SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT.

Erin McIntyre and Mike Wiggins form a formidable wife-husband local journalism team who are now entering the space of donor-funded journalism. The pair left daily newspaper jobs in 2019 and bought a 1,500-circ weekly in rural Ouray, Colo. — The Ouray County Plaindealer.

They are the only two full-timers on staff due to their budget. So joining Report for America was vital for growth. The Report for America corps member will report on affordable housing in Ouray County. The work will reach into other related topics, including stories about quality of life, economy and the cultural and social costs of having a growing workforce that cannot afford to live in the county.

It was also vital, due to their budget, to get donor support. They, like many U.S. newsrooms, were new to the practice. Immediately upon her Report for America approval, Erin began a low-tech campaign to her readers. Erin wrote a column in the newspaper announcing the award and a personal letter to readers delivered as part of the weekly newspaper. She explained the beat they’d like to create, which was a community problem that readers were already well aware of. She also explained the cost challenges she and Mike have in running the business with limited resources and the Report for America partnership that inspires local donor support.

She paired that snail mail effort with social media and website outreach as well. To date, more than 100 checks and online donations have surpassed $4,000 in total, with gifts ranging from $7 to $150.

So before their Report for America reporter even begins, they’ve made a nice entry into the space by making a community more informed of donor-backed journalism, having raised much of their funding already.

Erin’s takeaways from first steps into fundraising:

- They distributed the letter within their newspaper delivery. This saved expensive mailing costs.
- A pre-addressed envelope was included in the letter delivery, engaging recipients and inviting them to send in checks.
- They want to try more social media in the future.
LOCA L READERS SHARE WHY THEY GIVE.

“In this age where the newspaper industry is in deep decline, I believe in supporting the work of local journalists as a much-needed ‘check’ on government officials and businesses.”
- Dan S from Illinois, for The Daily Herald

“Love having a local paper”
- Susie M from Colorado, for the Ouray County Plaindealer

“High quality independent local journalism is more important now than ever before”
- Kerri Ann T from Massachusetts

“America needs local coverage -- long live the 4th estate”
- Jennifer G from Utah, for the Salt Lake Tribune

“I love local journalism and it seriously needs some love these days!”
- Diane D from Florida

“I’m a veteran reporter who wants the profession to flourish.”
- John M from Texas

“I believe in the importance of an informed public.”
- Brad W from Illinois

“We all thrive with access to fair and objective news and information.”
- Erin W from New Jersey

“Without local newspapers, democracy dies.”
- Lauren F from New York
Report for America, an initiative of The GroundTruth Project, is an innovative national service program that matches talented, diverse journalists with local newsrooms from California to Connecticut, and New Jersey to North Dakota for a year of service, reporting on under-covered challenges such as education, criminal justice, environment, and health. Our “corps members” are full-time employees of the news organizations they are matched with — daily newspapers, radio stations, nonprofit newsrooms, and weeklies — and receive training, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Additionally, all corps members complete a media-related service project in the local community.

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