

NEW JERSEY CIVIC INFORMATION CONSORTIUM

Championing Local News,
Empowering News Startups, and
Key Insights for States Considering
a Similar Model

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“Local news is a matter of democracy. When citizens are not informed, they are less engaged and democracy declines. The state and country are at a paradoxical time—we are simultaneously awash in information from the internet, yet suffering from a continuing decline in trusted, objective local news sources. Worse, the rise of local news deserts, disinformation and misinformation abound.”¹

— Chris Daggett
Board Chair and Interim Executive Director
New Jersey Civic Information Consortium

Executive Summary

This paper examines the creation, role and impact of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC or, the Consortium), a non-profit entity established by state statute in August 2018 to combat the decline of local news and civic engagement in the state. It was written for NJCIC and from its perspective and does not address the overall impact of their work. Impact is the subject of a separate report completed last year, entitled “[2024 Impact Report](#),” by Hanna Siemaszko and Sarah Stobely.

The report also includes profiles of four Consortium grantees, to give readers a more in-depth look both at the focus of the Consortium’s grantmaking and the impact of individual grants.

New Jersey is the first state to use state-appropriated funds to address the local news crisis and the rise of news deserts and misinformation by supporting news startup, early-stage, and more established products/outlets that seek to rebuild the community information network and grow the local news ecosystem. Along with Texas, New Jersey has lost the most newspaper journalists in the United States since 2005, when measured on a per capita, population growth-adjusted basis.

After massive layoffs at several local legacy New Jersey newspapers, Free Press, a media advocacy group, with the support of several foundations, initiated an effort in 2016 to reimagine the future of local news in the state. Advocates proposed using funds from the auction of two state-held public television licenses to create an endowment for civic and news startups.

Initial efforts failed after most of the auction money was used to close a state budget gap. However, with strong grassroots support, Free Press successfully lobbied legislators to establish the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium. In 2018, the bill was passed with bipartisan support and signed into law by Governor Phil Murphy. The state originally allocated \$500,000 to the organization in 2020, but each year has added more funding, which now totals \$13.5 million since its inception. The organization has added to its state funding with the help primarily of foundations.

¹ 2022 Annual Report, New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, page 2.

The Consortium is governed by a bipartisan 16-member board that includes representatives appointed by the governor (2), the legislative leaders of each party in the state assembly and state senate (4), six member state colleges and universities (6), and the public at large, appointed by the board (4). Its mission is to act as an incubator for local news outlets and fund initiatives that strengthen local journalism, foster civic engagement, and serve the information needs of underserved communities.

By 2024, the Consortium awarded nearly \$9 million in grants to almost 60 projects across New Jersey, from rural Warren County to urban Trenton and the coastal town of Atlantic City. With a staff of four, the Consortium is led by long-time local news champion, board chair and interim director Chris Daggett. The Consortium works in close coordination with the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, which has developed New Jersey News Commons to monitor and bring together the state's local news ecosystem for collaboration, training, and tech and advisory support. The Consortium's work is also supported by outside service providers such as Blue Engine Collaborative and the Documenters program of City Bureau.

The Consortium has supplemented its state appropriations with more than \$2 million in foundation funding, some of which came after its designation as a local chapter of Press Forward, a national effort led by MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Democracy Fund, that has raised more than \$500 million in support of local news in the United States.

Today, the lessons learned from NJCIC's early years can serve as a model for states that seek to address the local news crisis and increase civic engagement. While other states have passed legislation—for example, tax incentives, fellowship programs, and placement of state advertising dollars—to help local news, New Jersey is the only state that has developed a start-up and early stage, comprehensive, and systematic business model approach through direct financial support.

This paper concludes by identifying 12 key lessons for states to consider as they examine the Consortium's work, including its success in building partnerships, fostering bipartisan support, and promoting entrepreneurship in underserved communities. Additionally, the paper offers 10 recommendations, from enhancing brand awareness, to leveraging journalism training and developing partnerships with local media, to ensure the future of local news and civic engagement in the Garden State.

The Press Forward New Jersey meeting

On a late summer morning on Monday, June 24, 2024, the CEOs of three leading national foundations that raised \$500 million to support local media over the next five years— MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Democracy Fund—came to Duke Farms in suburban Hillsborough, New Jersey, to hold a kick-off meeting of Press Forward New Jersey (PFNJ). The focus: increasing support for local news and

civic engagement in the Garden State. Joining them were leaders from the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC, njcivicinfo.org), Community Foundation of New Jersey, and 20 private, family and corporate foundations. PFNJ was one of 31 local Press Forward chapters established in 2024 to address the loss of local news and the rise in disinformation nationwide.²

For [Chris Daggett](#), NJCIC board chair and interim executive director, retired president and CEO of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and a long-time champion of local news in his native state, this gathering represented a pivotal moment for the Consortium. Daggett, the NJCIC staff, and four of its grantees described how the Consortium worked, the grantees' impact on local communities, and how other states might adopt a similar model during the luncheon event.

"Local news is the foundation of democracy," Daggett told the roomful of 65 attendees at the PFNJ gathering. "It's where social, political, and community discourse begins, where most residents first get engaged in their communities. Without trusted, accurate news and information, residents are less or not at all engaged, and democracy suffers, and ultimately, dies."³

In 2018, New Jersey had become the first state in the United States—and still the only one through year-end 2024—to dedicate state government funds to address the local news crisis through direct operational and programmatic support of news outlets. With bipartisan votes, the Consortium was established by the State Legislature as an independent nonprofit organization through passage of bill A3628 (see key numbers in **Exhibit 1** and chronology in **Exhibit 2**). In May 2020, after appointments were made to its 16-member board, NJCIC applied for and received its 501(c)(3) tax-exempt approval. That effort was followed by development of bylaws, a conflict of interest policy, and grant application procedures.

Initial state funding of \$500,000 was received in 2021, followed by \$2 million in 2022, \$4 million in both 2023 and 2024, and \$3 million in 2025. The Consortium has used these funds to support local news startups and community groups in their news and civic engagement efforts. By calendar year-end 2024, NJCIC had been responsible for distributing almost \$9 million in state funds—and an additional \$2.5 million raised from private foundations—to nearly 60 grantees statewide (See **Exhibits 5** and **6**). Through the PFNJ partnership, the Consortium aims to expand its annual funding base beyond state appropriations and initial foundation support. According to NJCIC's three year strategic plan, 30% of the annual goal of \$5 million by 2026 is expected to come from private foundations.⁴

For the Garden State, the continuing loss of local news is urgent. Many New Jerseyans have traditionally relied on print newspapers for local news and informed decision-making, but those newspapers have been gradually disappearing over the past 20 years. Since 2005, New Jersey is one of two states that has experienced the

² Press Forward ultimately plans to have 47 local chapters nationwide.

³ Chris Daggett, remarks at Press Forward New Jersey meeting, June 24, 2024.

⁴ New Jersey Civic Information Consortium Strategic Plan, 2024-2026, page 7.

highest loss of jobs for newspaper journalists, when adjusted on a per-capita, population growth basis.⁵ Adding to the urgency, Advance Publications, which owns several legacy newspapers in the state, including *The Star-Ledger*, the state's largest news publication, and *The Jersey Journal*, announced in October 2024 that it would cease print publication of the former and close the latter in February 2025 and focus entirely on its digital news products, including [nj.com](https://www.nj.com).

"New Jersey is often seen as a leader in local news and civic information," Daggett wrote in the NJCIC strategic plan about the Consortium's role in investing in local news startups and in providing local citizens with the resources to make informed choices. "Yet we still have real work to do to make it fully representative and sustainable in all of our diverse communities. It starts with investing in providers who are representative of the communities they serve, connecting them with the resources they need to grow, and increasing awareness of and advocacy for the sector."⁶

In making grants, there were three areas the Consortium sought to focus on in 2024: civic news and information reporting; increasing the pipeline of new journalists entering the field; and civic engagement in New Jersey communities (see **Exhibit 8**). In accordance with the Civic Information Bill's mandate to serve the "evolving needs of New Jersey's underserved communities,"⁷ emphasis was also placed on grant applicants in the "BIPOC, rural, low-income, and non-English speaking immigrant communities"⁸ that have often been underrepresented in legacy mainstream media and where news deserts often exist. To date, approximately 48%⁹ of the NJCIC grants have been made to BIPOC-led projects. NJCIC also provided selected grantees some limited infrastructure support, including capacity building and training programs such as a technology and sustainability accelerator with Blue Engine Collaborative.

NJCIC's grantees have been diverse in terms of geography, target audience, and mission. This was reflective of the four grantees who spoke in a panel discussion at the PFNJ meeting: [The Trenton Journal](#), which serves Black and brown communities in the state capital; [Ridge View Echo](#), which covers the rural communities of Blairstown, Hardwick, Knowlton and Frelinghuysen in northwest New Jersey; [Slice of Culture](#), which engages Generation Z readers in the diverse communities of Jersey City; and Hopeloft, a non-profit community development organization in Bridgeton, which publishes community news through its [Follow South Jersey](#) site.

The four grantees spoke of the impact they had on their local communities. Kenneth Miles, the founder of the Trenton Journal, talked about the opportunity to produce news that helped to address the information gaps within the city of Trenton in highlighting the positive voices within the community and the challenge of being a

⁵ "The State of Local News: The 2022 Report," Northwestern Medill Local News Initiative, 2022, page 28.

⁶ New Jersey Civic Information Consortium Strategic Plan, 2024-2026, page 2.

⁷ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 "An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium," C. 18A: 64-94(1)(e).

⁸ New Jersey Civic Information Consortium Strategic Plan, 2024-26, page 3.

⁹ Impact at a Glance, New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, 2024.

start-up. Paul Avery, the founding editor of Ridge View Echo, noted the rapid growth in the site's readership in a region without a locally-owned paper since 1995. Other neighboring townships in rural Warren County were now asking when they might be added to Ridge View Echo's coverage area. Ernabel Demello, a St. Peter's University adviser to Slice of Culture, said that while "journalism has a branding problem" with younger adults following news sites less regularly, Slice of Culture is "changing this image with the young people" in Jersey City. Slice of Culture not only has editorial content targeted for Gen Z but also has "a dedicated group of young people producing it." And, Melissa Helmbrecht, the founder and CEO of Hopeloft, observed that community development organizations like hers might offer the Consortium another type of business model for NJCIC grantees. Instead of being a standalone start-up, Hopeloft already had the overhead for grant-writing and back-office functions in place to support an additional local news program like Follow South Jersey, making it easier to achieve long-term sustainability.

The New Jersey news ecosystem

"The New Jersey news ecosystem, like a lot of other places in the United States, has seen major changes over the last 20 years," said [Stefanie Murray](#), director of the [Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University](#), which tracks about 500 in-state local news originators across 565 municipalities.¹⁰ "The starkest of those changes is the depletion of reporting in the state; we have lost scores if not hundreds of working journalists — causing an incalculable amount of harm — as some of our largest news organizations have downsized and shifts in advertising have decimated smaller outlets. In turn, we've seen an incredible rise in the number of hyperlocal digital news outlets being launched in New Jersey and a resilience among ethnic and community media. We are so fortunate to have so many entrepreneurs in our state that are working to fill the gaps."¹¹

New Jersey's unique news ecosystem. Places and images of New Jersey are forever etched into American pop culture, history, and imagination: the Jersey Shore; the New Jersey Turnpike; the Boardwalk; MetLife Stadium; NJ Transit; Philip Roth; Bill Bradley; Whitney Houston; Princeton University; Bruce Springsteen; Thomas Edison; Jersey Mike's Subs; Frank Sinatra; Big Pharma; South Jersey; Rutgers University; Yogi Berra; the NHL New Jersey Devils; *Jersey Boys*; the Pinelands; Newark Liberty Airport; and *The Sopranos* television show. The list can go on. But what also makes New Jersey unique is its news ecosystem, especially for a state as populous as it is—being the 11th-largest in the U.S. with 9.29 million residents.¹² Unlike other states with a similar-size population, such as Michigan, North Carolina and Virginia, there is no major metro television market dedicated entirely to New Jersey. Its northern end, including Newark, is part of the New York City market, while its southern end, from Trenton to Cape May, is part of the Philadelphia market (see **Exhibit 3**). As a result,

¹⁰ Local News Map, 2023, New Jersey Local News Provider Map, The Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, <https://newsecosystems.org/njmap/>

¹¹ Murray email to author, October 7, 2024.

¹² *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2025, page 578.

print newspapers have traditionally played a larger role as the source of local news for New Jerseyans than in most other states.

New Jersey's newspaper landscape in the late 20th Century. Throughout the 20th century, daily newspapers were the backbone of New Jersey's local news ecosystem—largely dominated by Advance Publications, the North Jersey Media Group, and Gannett Corporation. The largest newspapers in the state included *The Star-Ledger*, which covered the entire state, but predominantly the northern half; *The (Bergen) Record*, which focused on Bergen and Passaic counties; the *Asbury Park Press* in Monmouth and Ocean counties; the *Courier-Post* in Camden and South Jersey; the *Times of Trenton*, which covered the state capital; the *Press of Atlantic City*, which covered Atlantic and Cape May counties; and the *South Jersey Times*, which covered Camden, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties. In 2005, *The Star-Ledger* had a daily circulation of 382,055, making it the 17th-largest newspaper in the U.S.¹³ It was widely regarded as New Jersey's statewide newspaper, featuring seven daily local news sections for local news¹⁴ across its seven-county coverage area in northern New Jersey and 12 state capital reporters in Trenton.¹⁵

The shift from print to digital. Starting in the early 2000s, newspaper economics nationwide began to shift with advances in digital, wireless, and mobile technology that gradually moved news consumption from print to online for the next two decades. Advertising revenue—which once accounted for as much as 80% of any newspaper's total revenue base—began to decline. Classified advertising, once the home to the local listings for job openings, real estate offerings, and auto sales, began to migrate to online sites such as Craigslist and AutoTrader. Retail advertising, once made up of local advertising from retail chains, such as Macy's, Sears, or local supermarkets, also began to erode.

Waves of print cutbacks in New Jersey. When legacy newspaper operations began to decline nationwide, New Jersey was harder hit than most other regions in the U.S. With Texas, New Jersey had lost the most newspaper journalist jobs since 2005 on a population growth-adjusted, per-capita basis.¹⁶ During the 2008 Great Recession, *The Star-Ledger* cut 130 newsroom jobs or 40% of its editorial and reporting staff, while Gannett cut 206 employees from six of its smaller newspapers, including the *Daily Record*, *Asbury Park Press*, *Courier-Post*, *Home News Tribune*, *Courier News and Daily Journal*.¹⁷ Other smaller independent newspapers, such as *Press of Atlantic City* and *Hunterdon County Democrat* also made cuts of 15 and 25 employees each.¹⁸

¹³ Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers by Circulation, 2006 *The New York Times Almanac*, page 393.

¹⁴ David Ng interview with author, December 5, 2024. Ng was formerly assistant managing editor, *The Star-Ledger*, and senior news editor, NJ Advance Media.

¹⁵ "The Star-Ledger doubles staff at Statehouse Bureau to cover Gov. Christie, Legislature, N.J. Supreme Court," *The Star-Ledger*, February 9, 2011.

¹⁶ "The State of Local News: The 2022 Report," Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2022, page 28.

¹⁷ Sarah Stonbely, "Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017," The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 2.

¹⁸ Sarah Stonbely, "Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017," The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 2.

Gannett then laid off half of its remaining editorial and reporting staff in 2011 at three local newspapers already impacted by its 2008 reductions—*Courier News*, *Daily Record* and *Home Town News*.¹⁹ In 2014, Advance Publications-owned *The Star-Ledger*, announced that it would cut 167 jobs, including 40 in the newsroom. The downsizing was part of Advance Publications' plans to centralize its editorial, advertising and marketing operations at the paper, which it described as “a grim day of reckoning.”²⁰

2016, a devastating year. In 2016, a year many media observers saw as devastating for local New Jersey newspapers, *The Record* and other assets of the North Jersey Media Group, which had been owned by the Borg family since 1930, were sold to Gannett in July. *The Record* was the second largest newspaper in the state, after *The Star-Ledger*, and the first to break the story of the George Washington Bridge lane closures by Governor Chris Christie's staff in 2014.²¹ At its peak, *The Record* had covered 70 towns and had eight daily zoned sections.²² In September 2016, almost immediately after the sale, Gannett announced layoffs of 426 employees throughout the Group.²³ Gannett sought to justify the cuts in a news release by calling it “an ambitious restructuring designed to make its newsroom and sales department more responsive to the growing digital demands of readers and advertisers.”²⁴ The 2016 cutbacks eliminated 21 of the Group's 53 weeklies.²⁵ Another 141 positions were eliminated by Gannett in January 2017.²⁶

A 2017 post-mortem study completed by Sarah Stonbely, research director at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, found that the cuts by Gannett negatively impacted the news of the communities it served. “New Jersey saw significant cuts to its journalism corps in 2016,” wrote Stonbely. “This was primarily due to the acquisition of North Jersey Media Group by Gannett Co. and ensuing layoffs, although other media organizations contracted as well...In a small survey of laid-off journalists conducted in December 2016, we found that nearly half had more than 20 years of experience covering local communities...In a comparison of four newspapers before and after the takeover, we find clear evidence of decreases in substantive community news and information.”²⁷

¹⁹ Sarah Stonbely, “Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017,” The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 2.

²⁰ Ravi Somaiya, “Star-Ledger Announces Big Staff Cuts in Reorganization,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2014.

²¹ Sydney Ember, “Gannett Buys The Record of Bergen County, N.J.,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2016.

²² “Gannett's slashing jobs at the Bergen Record,” *Medialife Magazine*, September 14, 2016.

²³ “Gannett's slashing jobs at the Bergen Record,” *Medialife Magazine*, September 14, 2016.

²⁴ “Gannett's slashing jobs at the Bergen Record,” *Medialife Magazine*, September 14, 2016.

²⁵ Sarah Stonbely, “Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017,” The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 2.

²⁶ Sarah Stonbely, “Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017,” The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 2.

²⁷ Sarah Stonbely, “Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017,” The Center for Cooperative Media, School of Communication and Media, Montclair State University, March 17, 2017, page 1.

2020 pandemic and planned 2025 shutdown. Legacy newspapers in New Jersey continued to face cuts into the post-pandemic 2020s, as all news media struggled to find a sustainable business model to compensate for the loss of advertising revenue, which had largely shifted to Google and Facebook. Even the mighty *Star-Ledger*, which once had been the de-facto state newspaper, put its Newark headquarters up for sale and reported a daily average print circulation of only 34,400 in 2024, down from 110,000 in 2016.²⁸ In October 2024, Advance Publications announced plans to cease print operations at all of its newspapers across the state, including *The Star-Ledger*, in February 2025²⁹, and to cease print and online publication of *The Jersey Journal* entirely after 157 years,³⁰ leaving a news void in Jersey City.

“[nj.com] is a local online news service associated with *The Star-Ledger* and other Advance newspapers and owned by Advance,” said Jeff Jarvis, author of six books on the media, distinguished fellow at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, and professor emeritus at the Craig Newmark School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY). “Though operated as a separate company at the start, it had rights to reuse the newspapers’ content. In 2014, the company shifted to a digital-first strategy, shutting down legacy newsrooms and transitioning to digital-only newsrooms. The remaining print papers will still be published until 2025. They are produced by a separate organization nicknamed ‘pubhub,’ which can repurpose digital content for print—a reverse of the relationship in the early days—but are not permitted to assign stories or journalists. Thus digital has become the primary product, print the byproduct. I always said that newspaper companies had to set a date in the future by which they would be fully sustainable digitally before the date when print becomes unsustainable. Advance has succeeded at that as its New Jersey and Alabama operations are now sustainable past print.”³¹

End of New Jersey Network (NJN) and public television and radio. With television studios located in Trenton and Newark, NJN was established in 1968 by the state legislature, but competing with the public stations in New York City and Philadelphia proved challenging and NJN focused on building its New Jersey news operations to differentiate itself. Believing that the state should not support a TV and radio operation that many New Jersey residents did not follow,³² Governor Christie ended NJN’s state funding in 2010, saying that he did not want to be a “programmer in chief.”³³

Soon afterwards, in the midst of the newspaper readership downturn, New Jersey sold its public radio licenses and transitioned its television operations from state to independent funding. The state then solicited bids for the programming and operations of NJN and on June 6, 2011, entered into a five-year lease (with two

²⁸ David Wildstein, “Star-Ledger had mammoth circulation drop in 2023,” *New Jersey Globe*, February 20, 2024.

²⁹ Lola Fadulu and Tracey Tully, “Top New Jersey Newspapers Will End Print Editions, and One Will Close,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 2024.

³⁰ Lola Fadulu and Tracey Tully, “Top New Jersey Newspapers Will End Print Editions, and One Will Close,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 2024.

³¹ Jarvis email to author, January 6, 2024.

³² New Jersey Network, Wikipedia, 2024.

³³ “Christie Drops State-Owned Broadcasting,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2011.

five-year renewal options) with Public Media NJ, a newly created nonprofit organization of WNET in New York. The New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority, an entity of the state, retained the television licenses.

New Jersey's ethnic media and underserved communities in urban areas. Another key part and uniqueness of New Jersey's news ecosystem is its vibrant ethnic media—among the largest in the U.S.—reflecting the diverse communities of the state that were often ignored by legacy media. The state's population is increasingly becoming a non-white majority, with the U.S. Census 2024 estimates showing New Jersey's make up to be 52% White; 23% Hispanic or Latino; 16% Black; 11% Asian; and 3% other.³⁴ The population of Latino, Asian, African, and European immigrants has also tripled in recent decades, with approximately one-quarter of the state's population being foreign-born.³⁵

“New Jersey is home to at least 140 ethnic and community media (ECM) organizations,” wrote Anthony Advincula in a 2023 Center for Cooperative Media report. “This includes 94 daily and weekly newspapers and periodicals, 35 radio stations, and 11 television channels, reflecting New Jersey as one of the most culturally vibrant, ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse states in the country.”³⁶

Despite this vibrant ethnic press, many New Jersey communities remain underserved by what was left of the legacy print media industry. “New Jersey suffers from being sandwiched between Philly and New York,” said James T. Thompson, a lead New Jersey organizer for Free Press, a non-profit advocacy group that was instrumental in helping the New Jersey Civic Information Bill become a state statute. “The area surrounding these more robust media markets, poor communities and communities of color suffer from a lack of journalism that speaks to their needs wherever and whoever they are.”³⁷

New Jersey news deserts. The cumulative effect of the cutbacks by legacy print media, the economic impact on the ethnic press, and the lack of coverage of underserved communities caused “news deserts”—pockets of specific geographic areas without a dedicated local news outlet—to begin to emerge throughout the state. This followed a similar trend occurring in other parts of the U.S.

“New Jersey is a news desert,”³⁸ said Mike Rispoli, who also helped lead the efforts of the Free Press initiative that resulted in the passage of the Civic Information Bill

³⁴ United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts, state of New Jersey, population estimate, July 1, 2024. Totals may exceed 100% due to responses to multiple races. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NJ/PST045224>

³⁵ Anthony Advincula, “The State of Ethnic and Community Media in New Jersey,” Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, May 2023, Page 5.

³⁶ Anthony Advincula, “The State of Ethnic and Community Media in New Jersey,” Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, May 2023, Page 5.

³⁷ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, “New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media,” September 2022, Page 8.

³⁸ Penny Muse Abernathy, “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?,” Hussman School of Journalism and Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, June 2020, page 88.

establishing the Consortium. Rispoli noted that New Jerseyans were mostly reliant on community newspapers because most of its broadcast media came from out of state—the 2016 cutbacks by Gannett and others only aggravated the situation.

According to the 2024 Northwestern/Medill State of Local News Project, seven of New Jersey’s 21 counties—Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Hunterdon, Salem and Warren, serving a total of 1.14 million New Jerseyans—each had six or fewer local news media outlets.³⁹ And one of those—Salem—was on the Northwestern Medill State of Local News Project’s local news ecosystem “at risk” barometer, a list that project leaders produce to heighten awareness of communities that might not have a local newspaper by 2028.⁴⁰

The [New Jersey News Ecosystem Mapping Project](#), completed by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University in April 2020, captured the state’s local news ecosystem in more granular detail—at the municipality level⁴¹—on the basis of the number of [local news suppliers/outlets](#) (see **Exhibit 4**, left), the number of [local news originators](#) (see **Exhibit 4**, right), and local news originators per 10K population. Unlike the Northwestern/Medill Local News Project, the Center used a methodology based on local coverage area, rather than where an outlet’s (or local news supplier’s) main office is based.⁴² This method helped better identify pockets of news deserts within counties.

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, observed: “There are all kinds of news deserts all over the country that have been created by this new news ecology, so that small newspapers and medium-sized newspapers have either shriveled to the point of disappearance or they’ve closed their doors completely. Newsrooms across the river [from Manhattan] in New Jersey, for example, that used to have a couple hundred people in them, have a couple dozen, at best. They’re hanging on by their fingernails. If that had been replaced by websites with equally aggressive, or even better, news gatherers of reporters and editors, that would be one thing, but they haven’t.”⁴³

Impact on civic engagement. The loss of local news outlets nationwide has a profound impact on civic engagement. “Recent research has shown that in communities without a local news outlet, the lack of journalistic oversight and transparency leads to a lack of accountability in government and business, which

³⁹ “The State of Local News: The 2024 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2024 and author’s analysis. Local news outlets defined as newspapers, standalone digital sites, network sites, ethnic outlets and public broadcasting.

⁴⁰ “The State of Local News: The 2024 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2024. Local News Ecosystem Barometer can be found at: <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/localnewsecosystembarometer>

⁴¹ Municipality can refer to a city, township, borough, or village.

⁴² “Local News Map,” News Ecosystems, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, April 2020, <https://newsecosystems.org/njmap/>

⁴³ Terry Gross, “Veteran news editor expects Trump to go after the press in every conceivable way,” National Public Radio, November 20, 2024.

<https://www.npr.org/2024/11/20/nx-s1-5192627/trump-press-martyr-baron-david-remnick>

causes residents to pay more in taxes for the goods and services they need,” said Penny Muse Abernathy, a researcher on the impact of news deserts nationwide. “Voter participation—especially in local and state elections—also decreases. Into this news void creeps misinformation and disinformation, which leads to political polarization around national—not local—issues and a crippling inability of residents to understand the problems confronting them and to come together to chart a new path forward.”⁴⁴

Emergence of local digital news sites. To compensate for the loss of local print news, local digital news sites began to emerge throughout the state following the 2020 pandemic, similar to what was happening elsewhere in the U.S. In addition to the NJCIC grantees, these startups included other independent and locally-owned sites, such as Village Green and Word of Monmouth,⁴⁵ and those owned by the non-profit Corporation for New Jersey Local Media, which had acquired the New Jersey Hills Media Group, a collection of weekly papers, in 2022.⁴⁶

The Path to the Civic Information Bill

Early Beginnings: Informed Communities initiatives. After taking the helm of Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation in 2010, Daggett sought to “make New Jersey a laboratory for local news,” pushing forward the “Informed Communities” initiative and creating a dedicated program area, under the direction of Molly de Aguiar in 2011. Daggett, an independent candidate for New Jersey governor in 2009, who was born and raised in the state, had a long-time passion for local news and civic engagement. He had served as the president of his high school student body, student body vice president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and worked for the federal and state governments as a Regional Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environment Protection, and Deputy Chief of Staff to Governor Thomas Kean. Even though Daggett never worked as a journalist, he often interacted with them as a public official, noting his “passion about local news dates back over some 40 years serving in various capacities in the New Jersey governmental, business, and nonprofit sectors.”⁴⁷

The Informed Communities program made grants to “foster robust civic engagement through inclusive, people-powered news and information projects across the state.” These grants supported a range of projects and ideas that explored the future of local journalism, with an emphasis on collaborative reporting, community participation, and creative storytelling formats.”⁴⁸ In addition to the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University and the Free Press initiative to

⁴⁴ Penelope Muse Abernathy, “Saving Community Journalism,” “The State of Local News: The 2023 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2023, page 81.

⁴⁵ Current Members, LION Publishers, <https://www.lionpublishers.com/members/>, accessed December 11, 2024.

⁴⁶ New Jersey Hills Media Group history, https://www.newjerseyhills.com/site/company_history/

⁴⁷ Chris Daggett, remarks at Press Forward New Jersey meeting, June 24, 2024.

⁴⁸ Molly de Aguiar, former program officer of Informed Communities Initiative, Geraldine Dodge Foundation, LinkedIn page.

support the Civic Information Bill later on, other program grantees included Manhattan-based WNYC radio for New Jersey news coverage, NJ Spotlight, and the Center for Investigative Reporting for various engagement projects, including the Toxic NJ collaborative project on the state's numerous waste sites.⁴⁹

The importance of the Center for Cooperative Media cannot be overstated. It was one of the first grants made through Dodge's Informed Communities program and has become a focal point in the state—and beyond—for local news collaboration, training, and research, particularly in the past eight years under the leadership of Murray. The Center, combined with the grants of the Informed Communities program, formed a strong base to complement the work of the Consortium. The Center has provided invaluable support for the Consortium and remains an ongoing strategic and operating partner.

New Jersey's broadcast spectrum auction. In 2016, with the major newsroom cutbacks by Gannett and Advance Publications, Daggett and his colleagues at the Dodge Foundation, Free Press, and other foundations began thinking about supporting local news in New Jersey on a much grander scale, this time with public funds instead of just philanthropic dollars through selected individual foundation grants. Sparked by the pending sale of the broadband spectrum of two NJTV (formerly NJN, now NJ PBS) public television licenses that were part of a nationwide auction of spectrum to wireless technology companies and data providers, an idea emerged about using those proceeds to create a trust fund to support local news in New Jersey in perpetuity. Unlike in other states, New Jersey, not universities, non-profits or local school boards, own the licenses to its public broadcast stations.⁵⁰

The Dodge Foundation then partnered with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Democracy Fund Voice, and other foundations⁵¹ to support Free Press in the effort to win grassroots support to democratize media access and lobby Governor Christie and the State Legislature on the importance of using proceeds from the auction to support local news—even if the effort was considered a long-shot.

“We saw [the sale of the broadcast spectrum] as a potential windfall and as an opportunity to mobilize those communities that we were already working in,” said Rispoli, “but directed towards policymakers to take a portion of the money from the sale of the spectrum auction and invest it back into community information needs. That was the impetus for the Civic Info Bill campaign.”⁵²

de Aguiar, then the program officer of Informed Communities and director of communications at the Dodge Foundation, recalled: “In late 2015 or early 2016, during our work [at Dodge's Informed Communities program], we learned about the broadcast spectrum auction and started to fund Free Press to develop a campaign to

⁴⁹ Molly de Aguiar and Josh Stearns, “The Transformative Power of Letting Go,” Medium, May 23, 2023.

⁵⁰ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, “New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media,” September 2022, page 5.

⁵¹ Craig Aaron, “How the spectrum auction can save journalism,” *Current*, December 6, 2024.

⁵² Rispoli interview with author, June 11, 2024.

convince Governor Christie to use some of the money for local news and information for the public good.”⁵³

The NYT op-ed piece on the broadband spectrum auction. In late 2016, as part of Free Press’ campaign to win support of the governor and the New Jersey Legislature, Daggett authored an Op-Ed piece, entitled “Transforming Local Media,” that was published in *The New York Times* on November 28, 2016.

Daggett wrote: “The proceeds from these sales could produce enormous public benefits if they are used to build a 21st century infrastructure for public interest media. For states, communities and universities holding licenses in play, the auction presents an important opportunity to invest in new ways to meet the information needs of the public...”⁵⁴

“Perhaps nowhere is there a better opportunity to take advantage of the auction than in New Jersey. The state is part of a metropolitan region with a huge population, crowded airwaves and a big demand for mobile data. It owns four public TV licenses that are operated by WNET, the New York public television station. The F.C.C. estimated before the auction began that these licenses together could be worth as much as \$2.3 billion.”⁵⁵

Free Press’ push for the Civic Information Bill. The nationwide auction was completed in April 2017, and yielded \$332 million for the two NJTV licenses. In response to the sale, a bill was introduced in June 2017 that would set aside \$20 million annually over the next five years to support local news, and create a Consortium to oversee the fund,⁵⁶ but Governor Christie ultimately allocated the money elsewhere. Despite the grassroots support from local communities and the critical backing from Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald (D-Camden County) and Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen County), the initial bill failed to make it out of committee during the 2016-17 session, but a revised version, without a permanent funding structure, passed in June 2018.⁵⁷ A provision to include five public universities—Montclair State University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rowan University, The College of New Jersey, and Rutgers University—as part of the Consortium made it easier for the members of the State Legislature to consider the bill as it included an educational component to conduct research about the field and to create a pipeline for the training of new journalists in the state.

Kevin J. Rooney (R-Bergen County), a former New Jersey Assembly representative and one of the original NJCIC board members, noted that any proposed bill faced maze-like challenges in the State Legislature as it was being considered to become law. With 4,000 to 6,000 bills written annually in each house, only a fraction were

⁵³ de Aguiar interview with author, June 14, 2024.

⁵⁴ Chris Daggett, “Transforming Local Media,” *The New York Times*, Op-Ed, November 28, 2016, Page A21.

⁵⁵ Chris Daggett, “Transforming Local Media,” *The New York Times*, Op-Ed, November 28, 2016, Page A21.

⁵⁶ Dru Sefton, “NJ bill proposes using auction cash for news consortium,” *Current*, June 2, 2017.

⁵⁷ GovNetNJ.com, New Jersey bill A3628.

posted for consideration, and an even smaller number ultimately were passed by the legislature and signed by the governor.

“For any house to move a piece of legislation, you have to get the Speaker involved and have his or her understanding,” said Rooney. “You have to get the Senate President’s involvement, because if he or she doesn’t understand it or doesn’t buy into that piece of legislation, they’re not going to post it. And if they don’t post it, that piece of legislation is going to be dead forever...My conversation with any legislator is you need to have an understanding of the value of that piece of legislation and how it’s going to affect the greater population. And, in this case, we’re talking about a piece of legislation that really is created to improve areas within our state that are lacking in the resources for news and has the ability to benefit all different groups of people.”⁵⁸

Part of the Civic Information Bill’s ultimate success was that it focused “on a community’s specific need and not on saving legacy news outlets or journalists’ jobs.”⁵⁹ In local public forums, participants reimagined local news in many different forms: media-literacy programs, mini-grants for reporting projects, fellowship programs for young journalists serving underrepresented communities, and local apps to provide mobile access to key government data.⁶⁰ Rispoli recalled that the overall approach in the campaign was “to support quality local journalism, promising media startups and other efforts meant to better inform people.”⁶¹

“We asked people what they wanted to do with this public money made available by the sale of assets that had been set aside for public information in the first place,” said Chris Satullo, a former *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial page editor and WHYY news director who worked with Rispoli and Free Press on the campaign. “Should this money be used for other things like to fix potholes, improve public education and reduce taxes? The people at our forums said ‘no, fix public media.’ The goal of the outreach was to see how our ideas would land in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike...Then we’d ask the big question. ‘If this thing happens, what would you like to see us do?’ People understood that there had been a loss of local news, and they were open to taking this money to improve local journalism.”⁶²

Rispoli added: “We didn’t get as much resistance from lawmakers as we did from the legacy news publishers as well as public media leaders who openly lobbied against the bill. And we felt like that was the main source of resistance. But because we had allies in all different parts of the state, including Republican-led districts, we were able to get bipartisan support for it in both chambers.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Rooney interview with author, June 21, 2024.

⁵⁹ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, “New Jersey’s Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media,” September 2022, page 3.

⁶⁰ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, “New Jersey’s Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media,” September 2022, page 11.

⁶¹ Rispoli note to author, January 9, 2025.

⁶² Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, “New Jersey’s Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media,” September 2022, page 9.

⁶³ Rispoli interview with author, June 11, 2024.

Another of Free Press' success in winning support in the News Jersey Legislature was that it tailored its messaging themes, depending on where a lawmaker was located. For example, "In South Jersey, the most effective messaging focused on news deserts and the near-total lack of local coverage. In the northern part of the state, where the 2016 newspaper acquisition by Gannett of the North Jersey Publishing Group led to downsizing, layoffs, and reduced news coverage, the most impactful messaging centered on how to fill the resulting news gaps."⁶⁴

Governor Christie's funding diversion and Governor Murphy's subsequent bill approval. Governor Christie diverted \$322 million of the state's proceeds from the broadband spectrum auction to plug a hole in the state budget in July 2017.⁶⁵ He then proposed using the remaining \$10 million to support transmission towers and other infrastructure of NJ PBS. With the continued support of state legislators Weinberg and Greenwald and another Free Press-coordinated grassroots campaign, a second attempt to pass the Civic Information Bill made it through the State Legislature during the following 2018-19 session. A key meeting enabling the bill's passage took place in May 2018, when Anthony Cimino, executive director of the assembly majority, offered strong support and indicated that any funding would be limited to \$5 million earmarked for NJ PBS.⁶⁶ In June 2018, State Senator Robert Singer (R-Monmouth and Ocean Counties), whose district had a Gannett paper that experienced cutbacks over the past decade, became the bill's first Republican sponsor.⁶⁷ Because the bill had been framed, in part, as supporting journalism education in the state universities, it was first shepherded through the Senate Higher Education Committee in June 2018⁶⁸ At the committee hearing in mid-June, Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean, Jr. (R-Morris County) sought an agreement that the board governing the Consortium would be bipartisan, with no one political party dominating it. This was quickly agreed upon⁶⁹ and then passed by both houses a few weeks later. The bill was signed into law by Christie's successor, Governor Phil Murphy, in August 2018. New Jersey bill A3628 said that the state would:

"Authorize the establishment of, and to fund, the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (Consortium), a consortium of five State public universities [later amended to six with the addition of Kean University in 2022], to advance research and innovation in the field of media and

⁶⁴ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, page 19.

⁶⁵ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, page 3.

⁶⁶ Sarah Stonbely, Matthew S. Webber, and Christopher Satullo, "Innovation in Public Funding for Local Journalism: A Case Study of New Jersey's 2018 Civic Information Bill," *Digital Journalism*, May 2020, page 751.

⁶⁷ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, page 22.

⁶⁸ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, page 23.

⁶⁹ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, pages 23 and 24.

technology to better inform the State's communities to benefit the State's civic life and evolving information needs."⁷⁰

NJ A3628 appropriates money for the distribution by the Consortium in the form of:

"...grants that support news and information that benefit the State's civic life and meet the evolving information needs of New Jersey's underserved communities."⁷¹

Establishing the Consortium

Becoming a nonprofit. When the Consortium bill was signed into law in August 2018, no appropriation was made from the 2019 State budget. In 2020, the state appropriated \$2 million for the Consortium, only to withdraw the funds for a budget emergency due to the COVID pandemic. With the ensuing COVID disruptions of many state operations, the 2020 budget was simply extended for an additional three months, until September 30, 2020. Finally, in the nine-month 2021 State budget, \$500,000 was appropriated for the Consortium.

By that time, Daggett, who in 2018 retired from the Dodge Foundation, had been appointed by President Susan Cole as the Montclair State University representative on the board of the Consortium. He then pursued the appointments of Consortium board representatives by elected officials and other member university presidents. The board itself made the final four appointments, in accordance with the statute.

In 2020, the Consortium filed to become a 503(c)(3) nonprofit, tax exempt organization, with supporting bylaws and a conflict of interest policy. The board held its first meeting in March 2020.⁷² NJCIC officially became a non-profit on May 7, 2021.

The Consortium's governance and impact. NJCIC is governed by a board of 16 directors (see **Exhibit 7**), designed to be bipartisan and with no one political party having a dominant voice. The board appointments were made as follows:

- Two appointees by the governor
- One appointee by the State Senate President
- One appointee by the State Assembly Speaker
- One appointee by the State Senate Minority Leader
- One appointee by the State Assembly Minority Leader
- One appointee by Montclair State University
- One appointee by Rutgers University
- One appointee by The College of New Jersey

⁷⁰ New Jersey bill A3628.

⁷¹ New Jersey bill A3628.

⁷² Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, Mike Rispoli, Free Press Action, "New Jersey's Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media," September 2022, page 27.

- One appointee by Kean University
- One appointee by Rowan University
- One appointee by New Jersey Institute of Technology
- Two public appointees by the board
- One media sector appointee by the board
- One technology sector appointee by the board

In addition, the Civic Information Bill mandated that “the grantees shall be independent from the influence of the State, a member university and any other grantor or contributor of funds or outside source.”⁷³ This is an important foundation of the program.

The first grants. In 2021, Daggett was elected by the board as its chair, with the \$500,000 state appropriation for the Consortium and no staff. He recalled: “We decided as a board to do it [the grants process] ourselves. We formed a Grants Committee and posted grant guidelines. We had 74 applications the first year, and, with substantial back-office assistance from staff at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, awarded 14 grants at \$35,000 each, which is \$490,000. We used the last \$10,000 to support grantee training efforts.”⁷⁴

Among the first grantees were Ridge View Echo, Trenton Journal, and Hopeloft—all now four-time grantees and who were represented at the June 2024 Press Forward New Jersey gathering.

The 2022 grants. The following year, 2022, the state appropriated \$2 million for the Consortium, which, in turn, awarded grants to 32 recipients. Ten of the original 14 grantees had their applications renewed. Without any supporting staff still, Daggett, whose duties by then had been expanded by the board to include Interim Executive Director, and the Grants Committee again relied on assistance from the Center for Cooperative Media. The new grantees in this cohort included [Black in Jersey](#), Slice of Culture, and Jersey Vindicator.

“I interviewed about 100 people at the start of this project to figure out what their information needs are in the state,” said Krystal Knapp, the founder of the Jersey Vindicator, a ProPublica-like site that produces investigative reports of local government in the state, and a 2022 grantee. “And they all said, ‘No one covers counties anymore. That’s 30% of my taxes. Who’s watching them? Who’s the watchdog? No one.’ In the first year, the \$75,000 [NJCIC grant] was pretty crucial; the whole goal was to get us up and running and publishing, which we did achieve.”⁷⁵

Emphasizing underserved community needs. In making their grant recommendations to the full board for consideration and approval, the Grants Committee put emphasis on meeting the “evolving information needs of New Jersey’s

⁷³ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 “An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium,” C. 18A: 64-101(8)(a)

⁷⁴ Daggett interview with author, February 9, 2024.

⁷⁵ Knapp interview with author, June 7, 2024.

underserved communities,”⁷⁶ as indicated in the Civic Information statute. Through 2023, almost half of NJCIC grants have gone to BIPOC-led organizations.

“If you talk with people in marginalized communities,” said Daggett, “you’ll find that they don’t like legacy media, such as *The Star-Ledger* and others, because they don’t have a local presence. Typically, legacy media flies in and out to deal with the latest car crash or murder or something that’s negative, and misses the true nature of the neighborhoods—for example, their cultures and arts. The vibrancy of life there goes unreported. So, too often, there is a negative image about a particular city or a particular town. The Consortium focuses on amplifying the voices of people that have not been heard.”⁷⁷

Daggett continued: “The Consortium also focuses on news deserts, such as Salem County, one of New Jersey’s largest and most rural counties, located in the southwest part of the state. It also is one of the poorest counties in the United States. Other than the *Elmer Times*, which is a small weekly tabloid newspaper with no website, there is no local news in the county. Largely agricultural and glass manufacturing, over time, a lot of jobs disappeared from the region as labor costs rose and farming changed from garden vegetables to crops such as soybeans. So, it’s become not only a news desert, but as we’ve learned in looking into news deserts, there are usually issues of poverty, crime, health care, housing, and so on. Similarly, there are pockets within urban areas that have voices that aren’t heard and need to be amplified.”

The Grants Committee. With a State appropriation increase to \$4 million in 2023, the Consortium was able to hire a program partner and a grants and communications manager (see section on Consortium Staff), and the grants decision process was devoted to staff. Grantmaking is now a five-step process. First, any interested applicants can send a letter of interest (LOI) to the Consortium before completing a [grant application](#). Upon review of the LOIs, the staff decides which applicants should be invited to file a grant application. The staff screens the grant applications and makes recommendations to the Grants Committee. The Grants Committee reviews the recommendations and, in turn, makes recommendations to the full board. And finally, the board approves the final grantees. The initial LOI screening step was added in 2024. Before, there was an open call for grant applications.

Even with a formal grant making process in place, the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University still plays a key advisory role. “They help us in determining our grant making strategy for the year, “ said Daggett, “and they are very good at knowing the landscape. They often know more about each organization than the staff.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 “An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium,” C. 18A: 64-94(1)(e)

⁷⁷ Daggett interview with author, February 9, 2024.

⁷⁸ Daggett interview with author, February 9, 2024.

When a grant application is rejected, the Consortium sends a letter with an explanation and offers to meet with the applicant and let them know how their application could be strengthened in the future.

The 2023 and 2024 grants. For 2023 and 2024, the New Jersey State Legislature appropriated the Consortium a budget of \$4 million for each year. In 2023, NJCIC awarded 37 grants. Thirty-one were repeat grantees, including [Morristown Green](#). Six were first-time grantees, including [Central Desi](#) and [New Jersey News Commons Spanish Translation Service](#). In 2024, NJCIC awarded 30 grants. Twenty-five were repeat grantees. Five, [Central New Jersey Network](#), [Chalkbeat Newark](#), [New Jersey Statehouse News Service](#), [New Jersey Urban News](#) and [Tarqum Publishing Company](#) at Rutgers University were first-time grantees.

Kevin Coughlin, a veteran reporter, took over ownership of the [Morristown Green](#) tabloid from Advance Publications after he left *The Star-Ledger* in 2010 to ensure its continuity of local news coverage for Morristown. As a one-person newsroom, he said, “the grant has enabled me to actually hire some freelancers with writing backgrounds— people that have written for newspapers. And that has been just enormously helpful. People who know how to cover a zoning board meeting, who can cover a council meeting, and who can cover breaking news that doesn’t require a lot of editing or rewriting. I’ve been able to do a lot of that, thanks to the grant money.”⁷⁹

Ambreen Ali, the founder of [Central Desi](#), covers news about the growing South Asian population throughout the state—with Asian Indians being the largest ethnic group of the state's one million Asian Americans and accounting for 5% of New Jersey’s total populace, the largest percentage of South Asians in any state.⁸⁰ It is also a population that is often overlooked by New Jersey legacy media. Ali said: “The grant has made it possible for Central Desi to exist. [I could] have continued just being a newsletter that featured my work...but [Central Desi] became more like a newsroom as a result of the grant. We publish stories every week. I now have a part time reporter who works on this with me. We’re planning to run another fellowship program...When the four fellows we had last year completed their fellowship, they talked about how impactful it was for them to just have this opportunity to write about their communities.”⁸¹

The Blue Engine Collaborative. In 2024, 11 NJCIC grantees and 10 other local news organizations were selected for a 13-session, six-month [Blue Engine Collaborative](#) accelerator program, which would train the participants how to sustain their operations in several ways: by identifying new revenue sources, building online audiences, and leveraging technology. Each of the participants was also provided with a business coach.

“The Blue Engine Accelerator program has been one of the best experiences we’ve ever had as a publication,” said Mark Tyler of the [Atlantic City Focus](#). “The classes

⁷⁹ Coughlin interview with author, May 21, 2024.

⁸⁰ “New Jersey,” Indian American Impact, <https://iaimpact.org/state/new-jersey/>

⁸¹ Ali interview with author August 21, 2024.

were valuable and the one-on-one coaching was phenomenal. Before the program, we did not know that our metrics were not completely accurate. We wanted to implement advertising but we didn't have a viable mechanism and we were looking to improve the user-friendliness of our newsletter. Blue Engine helped us address all three issues. Now, our Google Analytics account is set up properly, our advertising platform is being built out by a vetted web developer, and we have made modifications to our newsletter that have already generated positive feedback. And, as an added bonus, Blue Engine helped us engage an SEO expert to help our website reach more users looking for what we offer."⁸²

Measuring the impact. Grantees are asked how they will know if their project is successful. They submit their ideas/proposals and discuss them with Hanna Siemaszko, a research analyst at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. Grantees then track and select highlights of their own choosing on the impact of their grants. These highlights are measured in two separate classifications: The first is the impact of the grantees' work on their communities and the second is the impact of the NJCIC grant on the grantees themselves. In the first classification, the grantees' impact on a community may be measured in four ways: quantitative (web metrics); public sphere (third-party testimonials); institutional/structural (policy changes); or cultural (changing public opinion). In the second classification, the grant's impact on the grantee may be measured in three ways: deliverables (story counts, service hours, etc.); institutional/structural; and cultural. This information is then shared with the Consortium staff.

New Jersey Documenters program. In addition to its regular grants program to support individual local news entities, the Consortium also launched the New Jersey Documenters program in October 2023. This nonprofit program, powered by Chicago-based [City Bureau](#), seeks to create a nationwide network using trained and paid community members to attend and report on public meetings. The goal of the Documenters Network is to elevate civic engagement through increased transparency of local government activities. Created in 2018, the Documenters program has already trained over 2,000 local residents who have covered 5,000 public meetings in 11 cities nationwide.⁸³ With the New Jersey Documenters project, the program seeks to "showcase a model for how public and private funding can increase local journalism capacity, contribute to workforce development and equip local residents to hold their public officials to account."⁸⁴ Through the end of 2024, the program has successfully trained over 50 Documenters at three regional sites—coLAB Arts in New Brunswick, NJ Alliance for Immigrant Justice in Newark, and Atlantic Cape Community College in Cape May County. The Consortium plans to expand the program to other parts of the state in 2025.

⁸² New Jersey Tech & Sustainability Accelerator Program Summary, August 2024, page 11.

⁸³ "NJ Documenters program launched to promote civic engagement and transparency," New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, press release, October 6, 2023.

⁸⁴ "NJ Documenters program launched to promote civic engagement and transparency," New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, press release, October 6, 2023.

The Consortium Staff

The NJCIC has a small staff. In addition to Daggett as interim executive director, there is a program partner, a grants and communications manager, and a development associate. Ayinde Merrill, the program partner, and Madison McCool, the grants and communications manager, joined the staff in 2023. Lindsay McNamara, the development associate, joined in August 2024. McNamara's position was funded through a Press Forward Catalyst grant to help with the Consortium's fundraising strategy. The hiring of staff has allowed Daggett to focus more on advocacy, spending time at the State Legislature to ensure that funding for the Consortium is included in the state budget each year and raising funds from outside foundations. To date, NJCIC has raised \$2.5 million from private foundations for its grantees, primarily for Hopeloft. Though not on staff, part of Siemaszko's salary is paid by NJCIC through the Center for Cooperative Media.

As program partner, Merrill is responsible for overseeing nearly 60 NJCIC grantees and for raising the profile of the Consortium by meeting in person with interested grant applicants, especially in marginalized communities, where prospective grantees may not have capacity to reach out or apply for grants.

"[I'm] the intermediary between grantees and our grants committee and board," said Merrill. "I'm their point person for their project. So if they run into any struggles, or need to be connected to any additional resources, I'm that person. My main role is making sure that we're supporting our grantees and making sure they're hitting their goals and targets. And then, when they're not, figuring out and working with them on why they are not meeting those goals and if there are additional resources that they need, such as training or workshops."⁸⁵

A key change in 2024 was having prospective grant applicants complete an LOI before being asked to submit a grant application. By making this change to an LOI process the Consortium is now able early on to provide better guidance, identify common pitfalls, and share insights about practices that have been proven successful with the prospective grantee. "We're not trying to be parental in telling the grantees what to do, but having this increased dialogue with the Consortium during the first few months can help their long-term impact. We can tell them from our experiences what they're doing right and wrong. Often it's a matter of them trying to do too much instead of focusing on a few things to be more effective."⁸⁶ Another 2024 change was that half of the grant would be paid to the grantee upfront and the remaining half would be paid after a three-month review.

As the grants and communications manager, McCool is responsible for making sure that all of the grantees' reporting requirements are met and that grant funds are paid. Her other duties include planning grantee meetups, managing the Consortium's social media, and overseeing its press releases.

⁸⁵ Merrill interview with author, April 17, 2024.

⁸⁶ Merrill email to author, December 12, 2024.

"It often feels like we're building a house with our bare hands," said McCool of NJCIC's start-up environment. "We've been figuring things out as we go, but with staff now in place, we finally have a solid foundation to build on. The real challenge is figuring out how to operate at our best and most efficient. It's not just about getting the work done—it's about doing it well."⁸⁷

Local news efforts in other states

What's happening in other states? According to a May 2023 report by Jessica Mahone, interim director for the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, between 2016 and 2022, only 10 states had been proactive in trying to compensate for the loss of local news outlets by introducing bills that would provide tax incentives, state funding, or grant programs for news organizations (see **Exhibit 9**). Five of the 24 bills introduced during that time frame were enacted, including the Civic Information Bill in New Jersey and the creation of a task force to study the issue further in Massachusetts and Illinois. Efforts in many of the other states stalled in committee or failed.⁸⁸

From August 2023 to June 2024, 22 more bills were introduced in state legislatures, with New York and Illinois passing additional legislation.⁸⁹ "Public policy interventions in support of local news continue to pick up steam in state legislatures," wrote Mahone in a June 2024 update, "as state level advocacy efforts have increased and the news business has grown more precarious."⁹⁰ At year-end 2024, only five states—California, Illinois,⁹¹ New Jersey, New Mexico, and Washington⁹²—have successfully enacted legislation⁹³ to support local news beyond that of tax incentives or the placement of state advertising dollars. (An update on the status of statewide local news bills is provided on this online [tracker](#) page by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

⁸⁷ McCool email to author December 5, 2024.

⁸⁸ Jessica Mahone, "An Overview of State and Local Legislation to Support Local News: Policy Mechanism and Challenges to Impact," *Annals, AAPSS*, 707, May 2023.

⁸⁹ Jessica Mahone, "NY, IL latest to pass legislation to support local news," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, Center for Sustainability in Local Media, June 2024.

⁹⁰ Jessica Mahone, "NY, IL latest to pass legislation to support local news," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, Center for Sustainability in Local Media, June 2024.

⁹¹ "Local Journalism, students to see support thanks to Stadelman," Office of Illinois State Senator Steve Stadelman, press release, August 9, 2024.

⁹² Jessica Mahone, "Variety of state legislature supports for local news media act as a series of experiments," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, Center for Sustainability in Local Media, 2023.

⁹³ At year-end 2024, California, New Mexico, and Washington had enacted local journalism fellowship programs, Illinois had approved an in-state journalism scholarship program for state residents choosing to work in an Illinois news organization two years after graduation (effective January 1, 2025), and New Jersey had the Consortium grants program.

Similar to New Jersey, California has been a leader in passing legislation to support local news organizations. In 2022, the state provided \$25 million in funding to establish a fellowship program at the University of California, Berkeley, to place early career journalists in local news outlets throughout the state for two-year reporting assignments. Additionally, in 2024, it passed legislation requiring state agencies to allocate some of their advertising and marketing budgets to ethnic and community media.⁹⁴ In summer 2024, a bill called the California Journalism Preservation Act (AB 886)—as well as another related bill (SB 1327) to support local news organizations in the state⁹⁵—was tabled.⁹⁶ AB 886 would have required technology platforms to compensate local news organizations for using their content online. Instead, the state and Google will start a fund to support local journalism and artificial intelligence (AI) initiatives. The details are still being worked out.

“Learning from the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium was essential to the launch of the California Local News Fellowship Program,” said Berkeley-based Project Director Christa Scharfenberg. “The NJCIC leadership provided invaluable support as we designed our publicly-funded, university-based program. Their guidance, based on all of their learning about how to manage complex stakeholder relationships and shield these publicly-funded programs from political influence, helped us avoid mistakes and build a strong foundation for our program from the beginning.”⁹⁷

Like New Jersey, Wisconsin has considered providing grant programs to support local news organizations. A discussion about establishing the program began in 2024. The expansion could include a student fellowship program, a newspaper tax credit, and a civic information consortium, similar to NJCIC, to encourage local journalism and civic engagement.⁹⁸ Nothing had been enacted as of year-end 2024.

In a 2024 report prepared by the Northwestern Medill Local News Project, over the past five years, several states—including New York—have introduced or enacted tax incentives,⁹⁹ which ranged from tax credits to local business tax exemptions. On a municipal level, New York City has passed tax incentives¹⁰⁰ while San Francisco has required a portion of their advertising dollars to support local news.¹⁰¹

These legislative actions and proposals are tracked and, in a number of instances, actively engaged in, by Rebuild Local News, “a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advances public policies to counter the collapse of local news and revitalize

⁹⁴ “California Enacts Landmark Legislation to Strengthen Ethnic, Community Media with Ad Spending,” Rebuild Local News, October 1, 2024.

⁹⁵ Nikki E. Tobay and Samantha K. Trencs, “California Senate Passes Data Extraction Bill,” GreenbergTranrig alert, June 28, 2024.

⁹⁶ “AB 886: California Journalism Preservation Act,” Digital Democracy, CalMatters, 2024.

⁹⁷ Scharfenberg interview with author, December 20, 2024.

⁹⁸ Erin McGroarty, “Wisconsin news media would be boosted by three new bills,” *The Cap Times*, January 20, 2024.

⁹⁹ “The State of Local News: The 2024 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2024. page 42.

¹⁰⁰ “The State of Local News: The 2024 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2024. page 42.

¹⁰¹ “San Francisco becomes the latest city to use ad dollars to support local media,” Inside Radio, March 14, 2024.

community journalism.”¹⁰² From Steve Waldman, founder and president: “The contraction of local news is harming communities tremendously. We need bipartisan and nonpartisan public policy to address this along with better business models and more philanthropy.”¹⁰³

“[The Consortium] is a really important and pioneering model for public funding of local news and information that I really hope succeeds long term,” said de Aguiar, now president of the Independence Public Media Foundation in Philadelphia and an NJCIC board member since its inception. “I hope other states look at New Jersey as an example and see the good that comes from it. In the public campaign, the public said, ‘Yes, we want our tax dollars to go to this.’ It’s a really important model that demonstrates there can be a fund that can be carefully stewarded and largely shielded from political pressure. There is a collaboration between the state universities, nonprofits, and private foundations recognizing how important local news and information is for people to live good lives. My hope is that other private foundations recognize how important it is to continue to sustain this model.”¹⁰⁴

Stonbely added: “New Jersey’s local news landscape shows what can happen when dedicated people with vision and resources work for many years to cultivate the wide range of local news and information that people need. Beginning more than a decade ago with investments from national and local funders, through the codification in 2018 of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, to the ongoing work of journalism support organizations like the Center for Cooperative Media, New Jersey’s local news landscape has gone from experimentation to sustainability to thriving. Of course, challenges remain, but New Jerseyans today are better informed and more engaged, and the models pioneered here are now being replicated across the country. To me, this is surely a cause for optimism.”¹⁰⁵

Overcoming resistance to state funding. Jarvis, a long-time media observer, initially had reservations. He was particularly concerned if a similar government-supported fund did not have the independent and bipartisan governance structure that NJCIC has and could be manipulated and exploited in other states with governments reportedly more hostile to independent journalism, such as Texas, Florida and Oklahoma.

“As a journalist, I have difficulty with the idea of government funding in free speech, and particularly in journalism,” observed Jarvis. “But once one is over that hump, I’m happy to take part in the discussion about how to do it well. Number one, the Consortium set up the structure to assure its independence. Number two, it set up its mission to assure that it would grant money based on merit with accountability. So, I think that is a useful model for elsewhere, rather than just a blanket of giving money to all news organizations without defining quality, including hedge funds and

¹⁰² Rebuild Local News [website](#).

¹⁰³ Waldman email to Chris Daggett, February 4, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ de Aguiar interview with author, June 14, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Stonbely emails to author, October 2, 2024, and January 6, 2025.

including potentially extremist propaganda media. A fund needs quality control and accountability.”¹⁰⁶

Rispoli added: “Public funding is no different than philanthropic funding, corporate-owned media, or whatever it might be in the sense that whoever funds journalism, if you don’t have a strict firewall, the people that have the money can influence the product in the end. Just like how you have to have strong editorial standards in a commercial newsroom, and separation between the business side and the editorial side of things, you need to have strong protections so that foundations don’t meddle in what’s being reported on. It’s the same thing with public funding. It’s a concern, but it’s an overblown concern, because you can easily design something to prevent that type of interference.”¹⁰⁷

Laura Colarusso, editor of the *Nieman Reports*, wrote: “Individual state tax breaks, fellowship programs, or grant awards won’t solve the whole problem, but taken together, they can make a difference.”¹⁰⁸

What’s next? Ensuring the Consortium’s long-term sustainability

2024 New Jersey local news survey results. A [survey](#) conducted in February and March 2024 by the Rutgers-Eagleton/SSRS Garden State Panel and commissioned by NJCIC found that search engines such as Google were by far the most popular source from which New Jerseyans got their local news, followed by local newspapers and television. Sixteen percent said that they trusted their local news “a great deal,” while 63% said only “a moderate amount.” Fifteen percent felt that the local news in their area kept them “very well” informed, while 57% said “somewhat well.”¹⁰⁹

Daggett believes that the survey results indicated an opening to provide New Jerseyans with more locally produced news, especially from locally owned news entities: “The results from this poll give the Consortium, its current grantees, and future grantees a wealth of information to help them build news products that will meet the information needs of New Jersey residents.”¹¹⁰

The study also found that nine out of ten people sought local news because they wanted to be informed members of their community; that accuracy and transparency were the most important attributes that New Jerseyans wanted from their local news; and local activities, weather, crime and traffic were the most popular local news topics.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Jarvis interview with author, June 28, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Rispoli interview with author, June 11, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Laura Colarusso, “Tipping Point for Public Support?” “The State of Local News: The 2023 Report,” Northwestern Medill Local News Project, 2023, page 77.

¹⁰⁹ “Most New Jerseyans have trust in their local news, new poll shows,” New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, press release, July 15, 2024.

¹¹⁰ “Most New Jerseyans have trust in their local news, new poll shows,” New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, press release, July 15, 2024.

¹¹¹ “Most New Jerseyans have trust in their local news, new poll shows,” New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, press release, July 15, 2024.

Creating a permanent trust fund for the Consortium. Though it did not happen after the sale of New Jersey’s broadcast spectrum licenses, Daggett still hopes to establish an endowment—of perhaps \$50 million—from public and private funds to support the Consortium in perpetuity.

“The idea is that we need to have some stability in our funding because the vagaries of the legislature and foundations are such that they can be hot one day on an issue and cold the next day, or hot for something else that takes up their attention and funding,” said Daggett. “So, we’re living on pins and needles each year until the end of June, which is when the [state] budget usually is passed for a July 1 start. While [annual budgeting for the Consortium] has been proposed each year since 2018, we never know for sure until the budget is passed what the final number is going to be. 2021 was the first year funds were included in the final budget signed into law. What I worry about is that we’ve supported all these organizations, and then suddenly, one day, it’s going to just stop, because we didn’t get funding.”¹¹²

The PFNJ partnership. As a first step to diversify NJCIC revenue and to raise a trust fund, the Consortium, in partnership with the Community Foundation of New Jersey and supported by Press Forward, established Press Forward New Jersey. Press Forward is a nationwide, five-year, \$500 million initiative led by MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, Democracy Fund and others, to support local news and democracy.

“Press Forward is a national movement to reimagine local news,” said Christina Shih, associate director of Press Forward. “We are galvanizing local foundations, individual donors and government officials to see local news as a public good and philanthropic cause worth investing in. We also need strong examples of what a robust and growing media ecosystem looks like. NJCIC embodies the values and vision of Press Forward through their deep community listening, collaborative partnerships with news organizations, transformational grantmaking, and role in securing public funding. Although there is no one way to support local news, NJCIC offers lessons learned and inspirational examples that other donor collaboratives can replicate across the country.”¹¹³

Conclusion: Leaving a legacy of local news reimaged

“If local news is not the first priority of foundations, it ought to be everyone’s second priority as a key tool for grantees to communicate with their stakeholders, members and service areas,” Daggett said at the June PFNJ meeting. “New Jersey is the only state in the country with public support and public funding to provide grants to online startups and early stage local news and information organizations...yet, despite all of this support, it’s only a drop in the bucket needed to provide trusted, accurate news in communities across the state.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Daggett interview with author, February 9, 2024.

¹¹³ Shih email to author, September 10, 2024.

¹¹⁴ Chris Daggett, Remarks at Press Forward New Jersey meeting, June 24, 2024.

“For the past 14 years,” Daggett added. “I’ve been addressing this passion directly through leading the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation for eight years and helping build the Consortium for the past six years. In many ways, my work in local news is the most important work of my entire career.”¹¹⁵

These words resonated with Miles, who is also hoping to leave a legacy with the Trenton Journal. “I want [the Trenton Journal] to become sustainable first and outlive me...What I envision for the Trenton Journal moving forward is to be owned and run by the community. I’m proud of what we’ve accomplished within the four years since we began publishing. I just want to make this a financially viable product that’s well produced and a benefit to the city.”¹¹⁶

Takeaways

Unlike the initiatives proposed in other states to address the loss of local news, NJCIC offered a more comprehensive approach to rebuilding its state’s local news ecosystem. This was achieved with bipartisan legislative support to use taxpayer dollars to underwrite this effort. Since the Consortium’s inception, there have been a number of takeaways for states that might be interested in developing a similar program. They include:

1. Take a systematic multi-phase approach. Unlike other states that have addressed the local news problem with specific legislation—such as funding of reporting fellows or creating new tax incentives—NJCIC’s founding statute and subsequent implementation took a systematic three-phase approach that is commonly used by foundations or social venture capital funds in the development of new social enterprises-(see **Exhibit 10**).

In the ideation phase, after an initial letter-of-interest (LOI) review, prospective grantees submit grant applications for review if invited by the NJCIC staff. About one-third to one-half of the applications were approved for review by the Grants Committee and the board. This is a startup venture approach that includes the development of a minimal viable product (MVP) in the ideation phase. Upon final board approval, the NJCIC staff then supports the grantees in the experimental phase—assisting in goal-setting, impact measurement, and distribution of funds. Finally in the scaling-up phase, grantees learn to build an audience, leverage new technology, and find new sources of revenue through, for example, Blue Engine Collaborative, a tech-based acceleration program.

In 2024, the Consortium also developed a three-year strategic plan that provides a road map and benchmarks for its immediate future (see **Exhibit 11**).

¹¹⁵ Chris Daggett, Remarks at Press Forward New Jersey meeting, June 24, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Miles interview with author, November 27, 2024.

2. Build strategic partnerships. Partnerships have been instrumental in enabling the NJCIC to achieve its goals. Collaborations with key organizations, universities, and government entities strengthen the Consortium's impact.

Government Support: Public funding from the state forms the backbone of the Consortium's support. Sustained public funding is needed as NJCIC continues to seek other revenue streams. Daggett believes that without sustained public funding until new revenue models are developed to replace the advertising ones that historically undergirded media organizations, local news outlets will struggle to survive.

Civic-minded Partnerships: Alliances with other civic-minded, non-partisan organizations dedicated to increased government transparency and the promotion of democracy—such the partnership with City Bureau in establishing the New Jersey Documenters program—strengthens the Consortium's mission to increase civic engagement and stem the rise of misinformation and disinformation.

Foundation Partnerships: Collaborations with local, state, and national foundations, such as Press Forward New Jersey, play a critical role in meeting annual fundraising goals. These partnerships will remain essential for financial sustainability.

Academic Partnerships: Each grantee is required to have a member university partner to provide journalism-related advice. The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has been a cornerstone partner, providing vital research on the New Jersey news ecosystem, helping establish annual grant guidelines, making grantee recommendations, and offering tailored expert support to grantees. In addition, the member universities are in the early stages of establishing an internship program under overall administration by the Consortium. Finally, these member university partnerships are anticipated to bear additional fruit as the Consortium focuses increasingly on developing the pipeline of future journalists.

"Like many independent news organizations," said Kyra Dosch-Klemer, managing editor of Ridge View Echo, "we are a very small team with limited resources and are all working virtually without an in-person newsroom. This can feel isolating at times, but Montclair offers support in a variety of ways. For instance, when we had a question about copyrights last year we reached out to Stefanie [Murray] and she immediately set up a Zoom call to offer guidance and resources. Additionally, we have had opportunities to participate in things such as the Blue Engine Accelerator program which was a six month incubator focused on technology and sustainability. In addition to incredible action sprints and mentoring, we were also connected with other local newsrooms through this incubator."¹¹⁷

3. Seek bipartisan support. Bipartisan support was essential for state-funding. The Consortium would have never been established without the relentless efforts of the Free Press advocacy team in shepherding the passage of the Civic Information Bill from 2016 to 2018. By rallying local grassroots community support, button-holing the key state lawmakers to become the bill's champions, seeking sponsors from both

¹¹⁷ Dosch-Klemer email to author, January 17, 2024.

parties, and agreeing to the State Senate Minority Leader's request to add a provision that the initial 15-member board be bipartisan—allowing both political parties to make appointments—the bill became reality in 2018. The final component leading to success was inclusion of the representatives from state universities on the board so lawmakers could support this bill from an educational perspective, making it easier to originate out of the state assembly's low-profile higher education committee.

4. Encourage entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship was an important element in every aspect of the initiative. Early on, from his time as the president and CEO of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Daggett had the vision to “make New Jersey a laboratory for local news.”¹¹⁸ The leaders of the Consortium and grantees focused on innovation, resourcefulness, adaptability, and calculated risk-taking since the inception of the program. With almost \$9 million awarded to nearly 60 grantees through the end of 2024, these entrepreneurially minded grantees were also experimenting with different ways of storytelling to increase civic engagement: different social media platforms, newsletters, voter guides, and community events. Another key element to the bill's passage was that it was not written to prop up legacy media companies but to help discover new voices from different communities, which generated grassroots support.

5. Promote civic engagement. The loss of local print news outlets has led to the decline in civic engagement—lower voter participation, greater mistrust in government, and increased polarization. When the Civic Information Bill became state law in 2018, the State Legislature and the Governor recognized that “the people of New Jersey need accurate, relevant, timely and trustworthy news and information to be civically engaged, make informed voting decisions and work toward common solutions in their communities.”¹¹⁹ Daggett is fond of saying that the goal of the Consortium is “not about saving newspapers or journalism. It's about civic engagement and democracy.”¹²⁰ In addition to providing local news, several of the NJCIC grantees have hosted candidate forums and voter guides in their communities. NJCIC has also funded the NJ News Commons Spanish Translation News Service in translating versions of statewide news stories that Spanish-language media would otherwise be unable to publish. NJCIC also provided funds for a Washington, DC correspondent for NJ Spotlight, focused on covering the New Jersey Congressional delegation and issues on Capitol Hill related to the Garden State.

6. Empower underserved communities. Serving the information needs of the state's underserved communities was also an essential part of the program. One of the mandates of the New Jersey Civic Information Bill was to focus on “grants that benefit the State's civic life and meet the evolving needs of New Jersey's underserved communities.”¹²¹ In these underserved communities exist pockets of news deserts,

¹¹⁸ Daggett interview with author, February 9, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 “An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium,” C. 18A: 64-94(1)(a)

¹²⁰ Chris Daggett, Remarks at Press Forward New Jersey meeting, June 24, 2024

¹²¹ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 “An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium,” C. 18A: 64-94(1)(e)

and are where the lack of trust in legacy news media is often high. Through 2023, 48% of the grants were awarded to BIPOC-led organizations—New Jersey’s population is almost 50% minority—and this percentage remains the Consortium’s goal through 2026, the period covered by its first strategic plan.

7. Ensure local ownership and hires. The Consortium focused on building news outlets that were locally owned and operated as a way to increase the trust between citizens and local media. The study of New Jerseyans commissioned by NJCIC during early 2023 showed that there was a potential upside in demand for the type of original news content produced by the Consortium’s grantees. According to the poll, search engines, such as Google and Bing, were the most popular sources of local news in New Jersey, followed by local newspapers and local television stations. Eight in ten New Jerseyans moderately trusted their local news outlets, but almost two-thirds didn’t think local news outlets had an impact in their community. Creating local news sites—especially those overseen by fellow citizens in the same community—might change that perspective. “While it’s great that our state trusts local news and believes it mostly keeps them informed,” said Daggett, “there is much work to be done to rebuild its influence and ensure that local organizations owned and run by local people are the ones providing news and information to communities here.”¹²²

8. Build a pipeline of journalists. One of the longstanding goals of the Consortium has been to focus on “the journalism pipeline” and providing support to “organizations that train students, professionals, and community members to produce news and civic information, enabling them to be community storytellers and newsroom reporters.”¹²³ NJCIC has been able to realize some of its pipeline goals through a number of grants, including: two high school training programs; the South Jersey Information Equity Project; Hopeloft (a community development organization that developed news reporting and training capacity); a collaboration between the New Jersey Council for Humanities and The New School (development of statewide journalism program for community colleges); the New Jersey Documenters program (trained and paid documenters of public meetings); South Jersey Climate News Report (stipends for students to cover climate change issues in South Jersey); and New Jersey Statehouse News Service (training journalism students on the coverage of state government in Trenton and providing news stories for independent local news outlets in the state). This also is why board membership of six of New Jersey’s state universities is so important. One of the Consortium’s final grants in 2024 was to establish an internship program in each of the member universities, starting in 2025.

9. Encourage private philanthropy. The Consortium focused on building a network of private foundations to diversify its funding. In February 2024, the Consortium partnered with the Community Foundation of New Jersey and Press Forward National to establish Press Forward New Jersey to address the issues of local news and civic engagement in the state. The Consortium also received a \$250,000,

¹²² “Most New Jerseyans have trust in their local news, new poll shows,” New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, July 15, 2024.

¹²³ New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, Focus Areas and Guiding Principles, 2024.

two-year catalyst grant from Press Forward, which is being used, in part, to hire a full-time development officer focused on acquiring foundation funding and to make NJCIC less reliant on state funding. This diversification in funding is a key part of the Consortium's 2024-26 strategic plan, as NJCIC hopes to generate \$5 million in annual revenue by 2026, with 30% coming from private philanthropy. Near year-end 2024, the Consortium received an unsolicited private foundation grant of \$100,000—a promising sign.

10. Commit to independence in operations. The Civic Information Bill mandated that “the grantees shall be independent from the influence of the State, a member university and any other grantor or contributor of funds or outside source.”¹²⁴ This provision is an important foundation of the program. The NJCIC board serves as a firewall between grantees and elected and appointed state officials and government employees, even though six of the 16 are appointed by a state government official and six others by state university presidents. Board decisions on grants are made independent of any political official or group and based upon the Consortium's mission to provide financial support and grow trustworthy, community-based information sources throughout New Jersey.

11. Break from the mindset of legacy media. Journalism has shifted from the traditional, siloed approach in which a reporter developed a story idea, pitched it to an editor, conducted research and produced a story that was edited for publication. Today's reporters rely on legacy media's strength in accuracy and ethics, but are more collaborative and audience-centered. They engage with community members to better understand their needs and interests and develop stories that provide the kind of useful information to help navigate their daily lives. Additionally, the Technology Revolution has caused a critical change in the media landscape, democratizing journalism and allowing citizens to research, write, record and/or create digital stories that can be distributed globally on the Internet. As we reimagine the future of news, supporters of community journalism and civic engagement should break free of the mindset of legacy media and consider ways to encourage innovative business models, new digital tools, grassroots organizations and AI-experimentation.

12. Re-invest in local communities. Aside from promoting civic engagement, grant money reinvested in community journalism addresses a public service. It helps local news organizations to re-engage in their traditional roles as an economic driver in their local communities. They hire local people, tell local stories, encourage local business, and act as a resource when the community experiences a natural disaster such as a hurricane or a fire. The dollars from the Consortium help revitalize news operations where local journalism jobs have been shed over the past two decades. In essence, the NJCIC investment into local news operations, staff and freelancers is also an investment into the New Jersey community that they cover. Additionally, in rural or urban areas where communities have more needs and fewer resources, these grant dollars underwrite the storytelling that amplifies that need— so others

¹²⁴ Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, Chapter 111 “An Act Creating the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium,” C. 18A: 64-101(8)(a)

can see it and help, too. Grant money that is invested in local journalism jump-starts local opportunities, as any successful public-private partnership would.

Recommendations

For nearly a year, research was conducted to develop a case study on the Consortium that could help other states and organizations learn how to launch a similar initiative. This included more than 30 interviews with board members, staff members, grantees, and media observers and a review of multiple studies published on the New Jersey news ecosystem. Based upon this work, there are several recommendations for improvement as the Consortium moves forward:

1. Build brand awareness. While the Consortium has made good progress in its first five years as a startup organization, there appears to be little brand awareness of the organization's work within New Jersey, based on anecdotal evidence. Increased brand awareness of the Consortium and its grantees will lead to increased support from the public, in terms of both readership and donations. There should be a concerted effort to promote the Consortium through co-branding with its grantees with increased press mentions, local forums, and one or more statewide events. One thought might be to host an annual event, with sponsorships, at the location of one of its state partners each year, featuring discussions with New Jersey policymakers, newsmakers and NJCIC grantees. The event would be similar to what the [Texas Tribune](#), a noted statewide non-profit news site in Texas, does each autumn. The increased brand awareness will help generate additional individual donations, currently a largely untapped source.

2. Increase the focus on sustainability. More emphasis should be placed on increasing the business literacy of these NJCIC grantees early on so they can discover how to best reach sustainability more quickly—the acceleration phase. Each of the Consortium's news content producing grantees should be required to develop a business plan for sustainability (grants not requiring a long-term sustainability focus, such as those supporting journalism training programs or the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University's impact tracking for NJCIC, would be excluded here). The NJCIC grantees should be assigned a business coach from day one and be required to participate in a capacity-building program, similar to the Blue Engine Collaborative. Grantees seeking to renew their grants should be asked on their application forms, "What steps have you taken to build capacity, diversify revenue, and reach sustainability since last year?" Grantees seeking to subsidize their operations year-after-year with a grant, instead of investing in multiple revenue streams, is not a viable long-term strategy. The Consortium is planning to invest \$200,000 in its 2025 budget with Blue Engine Collaborative to support additional grantees with sustainability training.

Free business coaching can be provided through local programs like the Small Business Administration's [SCORE](#) program, made up of retired business executives. Membership in organizations like the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) and Local Independent Online News (LION) will provide grantees increased business training.

[INN](#) or [LION](#) membership should be automatic for all NJCIC grantees that qualify. For example, INN membership qualifications: being a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, producing original news content, and maintaining high journalism ethics. INN provides its members with training in business model, grant-writing, and new revenue generation as well as back-room support in accounting, human resources and legal. INN also matches a portion of new funds raised by its 475+ members.¹²⁵ LION membership requirements are similar to INN, except that members are independently owned and not necessarily a non-profit. LION provides its 575+ members with an online News Media Entrepreneur Academy, sustainability audits, and networking opportunities.¹²⁶

One of the NJCIC grantees, the Ridge View Echo, went through a LION sustainability audit in Summer 2024. “We found the sustainability audit to be a huge help and we’re grateful for it,” said Susan Wilinski, the Echo’s general manager, “as it allowed us to speak to someone from an outside source who took an objective look at our paper and where we might be falling short...They also gave us so many actionable items that we’re now working through.”¹²⁷

3. Develop deeper university partnerships. The Consortium’s partnership with the six state universities members is unique and offers more potential upside. Each NJCIC grantee is required to have a state university partner. This is a relationship that can be utilized more deeply. Several of the grantees have expressed difficulties in finding trained journalists in their communities. These universities can help provide a pipeline of qualified interns or fellows, one of the three main NJCIC’s grant objectives. Additionally, reaching out to business schools from these same state universities might be beneficial as they can provide additional support in market assessment, audience analytics, and cost analysis. The Center for Community News (CCN) at the University of Vermont, with the support of Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and others, is currently seeking to grow news-academic partnerships throughout the country, matching college student journalists with local news operations in “the regions that need it most.”¹²⁸ This might provide an additional pipeline of student journalists for the NJCIC grantees.

4. Support best practices. Supporting an infrastructure to allow grantees to share their best practices should continue to be an inherent part of the Consortium’s programming. Such an infrastructure has been developed and led by the Center for Cooperative Media, with its ongoing programs for local news providers across the state. The two organizations should continue their collaborative work. Many of the NJCIC grantees are all doing great things in resonating within their communities, experimenting with new ways of storytelling, and identifying new revenue sources. All of the Consortium’s grantees should meet at least twice a year in person at an NJCIC “Demonstration Day” to share their best practices. The “For the Love of Local News: Community Media Project Summit” scheduled for February 2025, is a start.

¹²⁵ “Explore Membership,” Institute of Nonprofit News, <https://inn.org/explore-membership/>

¹²⁶ “How to become a LION member,” <https://www.lionpublishers.com/membership/>

¹²⁷ Wilinski interview with author, December 16, 2024.

¹²⁸ Richard Watts and Meg Little Reilly, “UVM Launches Nationwide Effort to Grow Local News Reporting at Colleges Across the U.S.,” University of Vermont Foundation, July 8, 2024.

5. Take advantage of national journalism training opportunities. In addition to the programs offered by LION and INN, NJCIC’s infrastructure also needs to include education to its grantees about offerings from national journalism training organizations. What these organizations can offer may include frameworks—like Solutions Journalism or the Maynard Institute’s Fault Lines—or resources—like Report for America or The Tiny News Collective— or free training— like the sessions provided by ISOJ or Poynter. Knowledge of all of these opportunities could help NJCIC and its grantees build, grow and prosper.

6. Collaborate with legacy media and in-state news hubs. Collaboration with legacy media outlets can offer new partnership opportunities. As with best practices, the Center for Cooperative Media has led such efforts in New Jersey. While legacy news media opposed the Civic Information Bill during 2016 to 2018, the media landscape has since vastly changed. In collaboration with the Center, there is an opportunity for NJCIC grantees to partner with legacy media, such as Advance Publications and Gannett—especially with the former’s plan to cease print publication and focus on online products—to share content and possibly create regional news hubs through the NJPF Initiative. These news hubs would be similar to those being piloted in other parts of the U.S. such as the Central Valley Collaborative (California), the Northeast Wisconsin News Lab (Wisconsin) and Mississippi Spotlight (Mississippi).¹²⁹ These hubs will help increase the audiences for individual NJCIC grantees, provide shared content, and help reduce the news production costs.

“We’re still trying to get the legacy media outlets to be more open to collaboration,” said Knapp of the Jersey Vindicator. “They’re still working from the old model of competition, unfortunately.”¹³⁰

7. Focus on metrics and impact. What gets measured gets done. In their annual report, NJCIC grantees are asked to provide highlights on the impact of the Consortium grants on their local community. The responses are generally open-ended, either qualitative or quantitative, that can vary from including positive anecdotal stories from viewers, to how many journalism awards won, or the number of newsletter subscriber sign-ups. A more standardized and rigorous impact reporting approach, integrated with Google Analytics and competitive market analysis, is recommended. Developing a menu of impact expectations should be part of the grant process.

8. Champion reimaged local news and civic engagement as a social enterprise. The Consortium is the first and only state in the U.S. at year-end 2024 to use state appropriated funds to directly build local news outlets and increase civic engagement. NJCIC should be a convener for other states that are interested in moving forward with a similar program in the use of taxpayer dollars to support local

¹²⁹ “From Tipping Point to Turning Point: Charting New Pathways for Rebuilding Local News,” Microsoft, August 23, 2023.

<https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2023/08/23/journalism-initiative-local-news-shortage-guidebook/>

¹³⁰ Knapp interview with author, June 7, 2024.

journalism. Establish a dialogue with advocates in those states. Build a cohort of experts in areas that will help other states build something similar.

9. Advocate for press freedom. NJCIC may want to invest in advocacy of the state Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and sunshine laws, especially in the current political environment, where government transparency increasingly is being questioned and state FOIA laws are being challenged—making watchdog work more difficult at the city, county and state level. In 2024, the [Jersey Vindicator published stories about the New Jersey Legislature's attempt to weaken the state's Open Public Records Act](#), educating local journalists and the public on the potential consequences. “I think that’s why the government feels they can water down our laws because the media ecosystem is weak,” added Knapp, “And so my argument is we can be so much stronger together. We need to collaborate (with legacy media).”¹³¹ In 2023, the Consortium launched the New Jersey Documenters program, an initiative to train and pay community members to attend and document public meetings and publish the results, and plans to expand it in 2025 after rolling it out at three regional sites in 2024.

10. Strengthen the NJCIC team. The small NJCIC team needs to expand its staff to shoulder the additional workload in support of grantee sustainability. Seek a specific foundation grant to fund an additional staff member for this. While private foundations do not provide grants for training, they do for sustainability and impact. This staff person can also help institutionalize the Consortium’s sustainability knowledge.

¹³¹ Knapp interview with author, June 7, 2024.

Additional Readings

[New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, Annual Report 2023](#)

[New Jersey Civic Information Consortium Strategic Plan, 2024-26](#)

[Anthony Advincula, "The State of Ethnic and Community Media in New Jersey," Center for Cooperative Media, \(May 2023\).](#)

[Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, and Mike Rispoli, "Case Study on New Jersey's Civic Information Bill, Free Press Action \(September 2022\)](#)

[Hanna Siemaszko and Sarah Stonbely, "2024 Impact Report," New Jersey Civic Information Consortium \(September 2024\).](#)

[Sarah Stonbely, "Layoffs in Local Newsrooms: Documenting the changing New Jersey local journalism ecosystem, 2016-2017." Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, March 2017.](#)

[Sarah Stonbely, Matthew S. Weber, and Christopher Satullo, "Innovation in Public Funding for Local Journalism: A Case Study of New Jersey's 2018 Civic Information Bill." *Digital Journalism* \(July 2020\).](#)

EXHIBIT 1 | BY THE NUMBERS

73	Percentage of newspaper jobs lost in the U.S. since 2005.
\$332 million	New Jersey's portion of the 2017 nationwide auction of the broadband spectrum.
2018	NJ A3628 Bill signed into law on August 24 by Governor Phil Murphy, establishing the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC).
2021	NJCIC formed as a New Jersey 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation on May 7.
2024	NJCIC partners with Press Forward and the Community Foundation of New Jersey to create Press Forward New Jersey.
\$500,000	Initial state budget appropriation for NJCIC in fiscal year 2021.
\$2 million	State budget appropriation for NJCIC for fiscal year 2022.
\$4 million	State budget appropriation for NJCIC for fiscal year 2023.
\$4 million	State budget appropriation for NJCIC for fiscal year 2024.
\$3 million	State budget appropriation for NJCIC for fiscal year 2025.
\$2.5 million	Amount of additional private funding received (through December 2024).
55	Number of NJCIC grantees to date (through December 2024).
34	Number of NJCIC grantees who have received repeat grants.
14	Number of original NJCIC grantees in 2021.
550+	Number of digital-only news sites in the U.S.
5	Number of NJCIC grantees who received grants all four years (through December 2024).
21	Number of counties in New Jersey.
16	Number of counties in New Jersey with an NJCIC grantee, although several grantees cover news throughout the state.

- 565** Number of municipalities in New Jersey
- 48** Percentage of NJCIC grants given to BIPOC-led projects.
- 90** Percentage of New Jerseyans who seek local news because they want to be an informed member of their community, according to a 2024 survey by Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University and SSRS.
- 67** Percentage of New Jerseyans who say their local news sources—often search engine sites, like Google, or social media like Facebook—do not have much influence in their community, according to 2024 Eagleton Center /SSRS survey. This suggests a need for trusted local news sites.
- 85** Percentage of stories that are picked up by national news outlets from local news outlets.
- \$50 million** Daggett’s target future corpus of NJCIC, which includes private funding support.
- 50** Number of residents trained in the New Jersey Documenters program through year-end 2024.
- 15** Initial number of NCJIC board seats. Two appointees by the Governor; one, Senate President; one, Assembly Speaker; one, Senate Minority Leader; one, Assembly Minority Leader; five, higher education institutions; four, at large.
- 16** Current number of NJCIC board seats, with a representative from Kean University added.
- 6** Number of state institutions of higher education represented on the NJCIC board. They are Montclair State University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rowan University, Rutgers University, The College of New Jersey, and Kean University.
- 4** Number of NJCIC staff (December 2024).

Sources: New Jersey Civic Information Consortium annual report, “Impact at a glance” report, and press releases, The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State reports, The State of Local News Project 2023 (Northwestern Medill), other published sources.

EXHIBIT 2 | CHRONOLOGY OF ROAD TO NJCIC (2008 TO PRESENT)

- 2008** The start of the Great Recession Layoffs at Gannett-owned newspapers and *The Star-Ledger*.
- 2010** Governor Chris Christie announces end of funding for New Jersey Network
- 2011** The Dodge Foundation, under the guidance of its new president and CEO, Chris Daggett, launches the “Informed Communities program” aimed to strengthen local news in New Jersey. The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University is an early beneficiary as Dodge grants help them create New Jersey News Commons.
- 2011** Gannett announces layoffs at six local News Jersey newspapers.
- 2012** Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University launched.
- 2012** Hurricane Sandy. The Jersey Shore Hurricane News, with eight hyperlocal news sites, news organizations, and bloggers, acts quickly to respond. An early model for the Center for Cooperative Media’s New Jersey News Commons.
- 2014** *The Star-Ledger* announces layoffs of 167 jobs, including 40 in the newsroom.
- 2015** Free Press Action and others begin to brainstorm about ways to use proceeds from a national broadcast spectrum auction to fund non-commercial media and other states.
State budget appropriation for NJCIC for fiscal year 2024.
- 2016** Gannett acquires North Jersey Media Group, which includes *The (Bergen) Record*, from its long-time owners, the Borg Family. Significant layoffs by Gannett and at other New Jersey media companies soon follow.
- 2016** Free Press Action begins the groundwork for the Civic Information Bill in New Jersey and the blueprint for the Consortium.
- 2016** Chris Daggett, president and CEO of the Geraldine Dodge Foundation proposes in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, entitled “Transforming our Local Media,” that proceeds from the sale of state of New Jersey’s license of broadband spectrum be used to create a trust fund to support local news. The Dodge Foundation co-supports Free Press’ efforts to encourage the state to create this trust fund.
- 2017** Gannett announces additional layoffs at North Jersey Media Group.

- 2017** Sale of New Jersey two licenses in the national broadband spectrum auction nets \$332 billion in April.
- 2017** First attempt at Civic Information Bill is supported in the New Jersey Legislature with the sponsorship of Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald (D) and State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg (D). Wuickly dies when Governor Chris Christie uses most of the auction proceeds to close deficits in the state budget.
- 2017** Despite the state's failure to establish a trust fund for local news in New Jersey, Free Press, led by Mike Rispoli, continues to generate public support for the creation of a New Jersey Civic Information Consortium to be funded by the state annually in support of local news and civic engagement.
- 2018** NJ A3628 Bill signed into law, establishing the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC). Bill introduced on March 12, 2018; in Committee, June 18, 2018; passed by the New Jersey Legislature, June 20, 2018; and signed into law by New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, August 24, 2018.
- 2019-20** Administrative work begins to establish the Consortium. Bylaws and application to become a 501(c)(3) are filed in midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Initial funding of \$1 million is frozen by the Governor due to the pandemic.
- 2020** The State of New Jersey appropriates \$500,000 for fiscal year 2021.
- 2020** First NJCIC board meeting in March.
- 2021** NJCIC formed as a New Jersey nonprofit corporation on May 7. All board members are appointed and Chris Daggett, now retired from the Dodge Foundation, is named board chair.
- 2021** First NJCIC grants awarded to 14 recipients at \$35,000 each.
- 2021** The State of New Jersey appropriates \$2 million for fiscal year 2022.
- 2022** Daggett assumes additional role as Interim Executive Director.
- 2022** The State of New Jersey appropriates \$4 million for fiscal year 2023.
- The State of New Jersey appropriates \$4 million for fiscal year 2024.
- 2023** Ayinde Merrill joins NJCIC as Program Partner, Madison McCool joins as Grants and Communications Manager.

- 2023** NJCIC launches the New Jersey Documenters program, an initiative to train and pay community members to attend and document public meetings and publish the results. Goals are to increase civic engagement and government transparency.
- 2024** NJCIC partners with Blue Engine Collaborative, a technology and sustainability accelerator, to train a number of its grantees.
- 2024** NJCIC partners with Press Forward and the Community Foundation of New Jersey to create Press Forward New Jersey. A catalyst grant from Press Forward allows NJCIC to add a Development Associate, Lindsay McNamara.
- 2024** NJCIC completes three-year strategic plan (2024-26) with the assistance of Due East Partners.
- 2024** The State of New Jersey appropriates \$3 million for fiscal year 2025.
- 2024** NJCIC commissions survey on public's perception of local news in New Jersey by the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University and SSRS.
- 2024** NJCIC begins quarterly grant approval process and letter-of-interest (LOI) grant screening.
- 2024** Out of six Press Forward Open Call grants awarded in New Jersey in the Closing Local Coverage Gaps category, four are NJCIC grantees: Atlantic City Focus; Front Runner New Jersey; Jersey Vindicator; and Trenton Journal. Press Forward awarded 205 Closing Local Coverage Gaps grants nationwide.

Sources: NJCIC annual reports, NJCIC press releases, and news articles.

Exhibit 3 New Jersey County Map

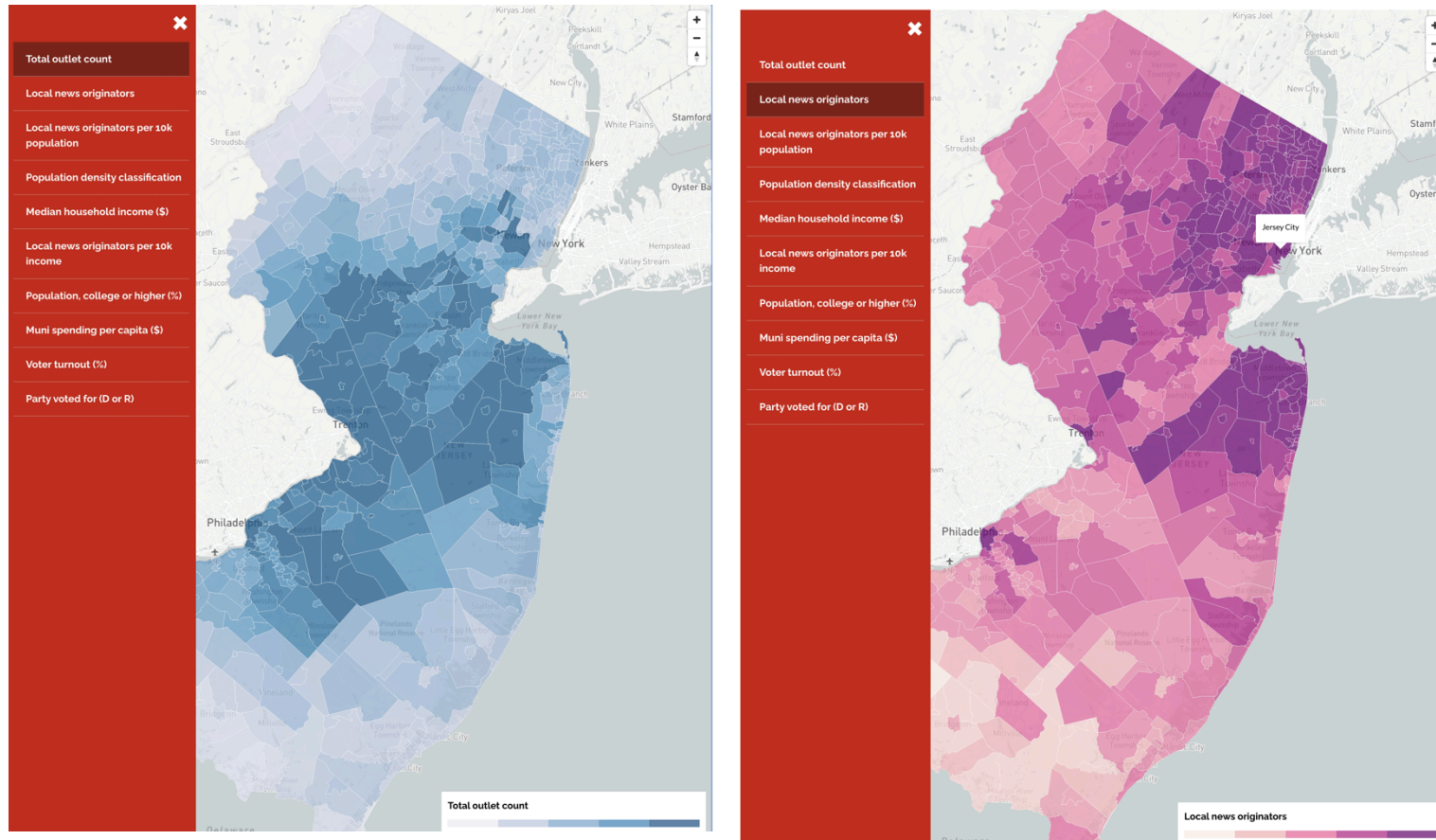
NEW JERSEY COUNTY MAP

Showing county seats, present boundaries and dates of formation



Source: State of New Jersey (Public domain usage).

Exhibit 4 New Jersey News Outlets (Suppliers) by Area (left) and Local News Originator by Area (right) (2020) —Maps



Source: News Ecosystem Mapping Project, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University.

Exhibit 5 NJCIC grantees (2021- 2024)

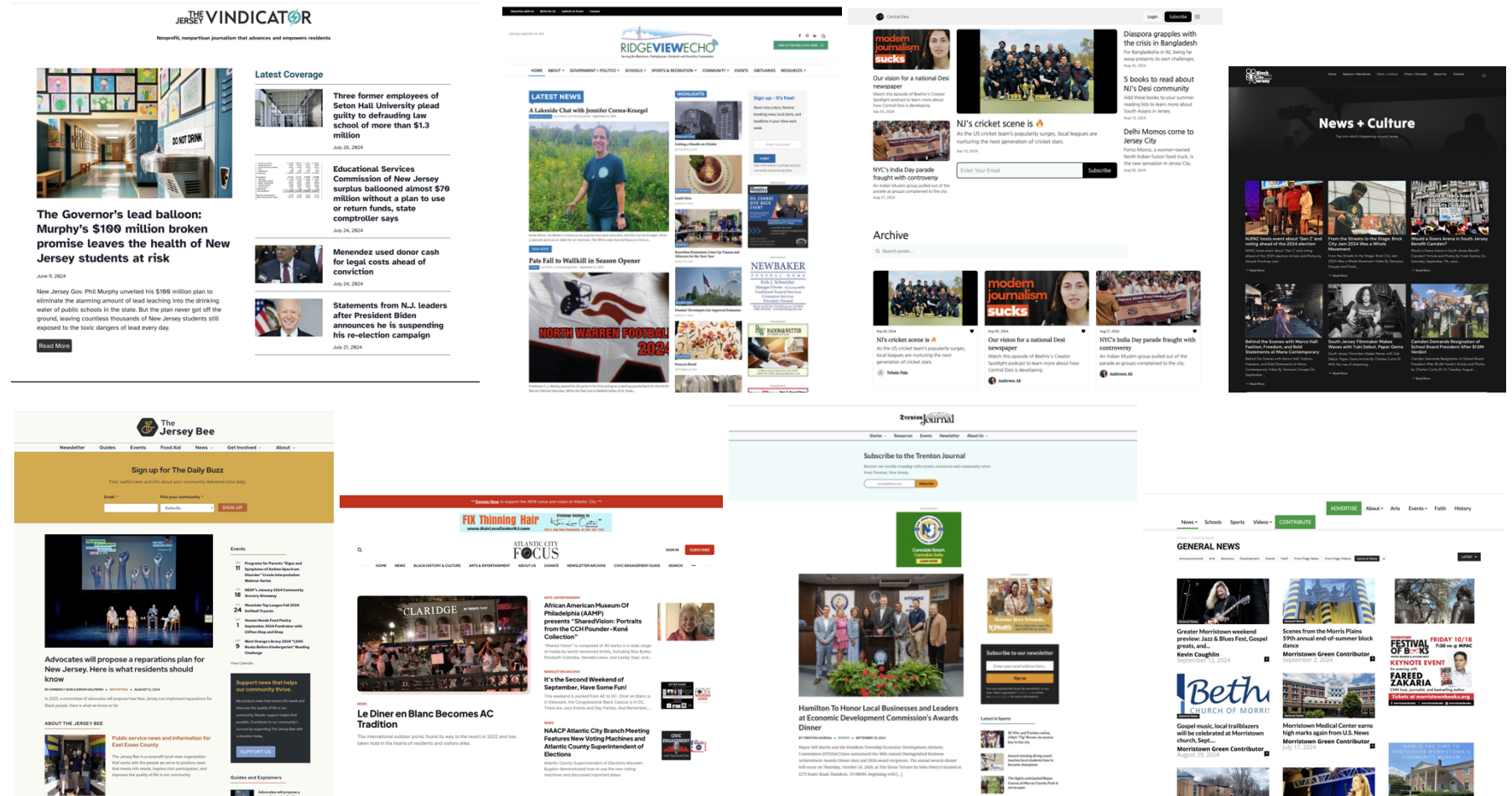
	2021	2022	2023	2024		
Asbury Park Media Collective		\$40,000	\$72,660		Monmouth	Create an incubator for emerging community reporters and local news makers
Atlantic City Focus		\$60,000	\$100,000	\$100,000	Atlantic	Local journalism and election civic engagement guide
Beyond Expectations, Inc.	\$33,876	\$40,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Burlington	Launch of be-TV studios for Burlington County students
Black in Jersey		\$40,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Statewide	Create a statewide news and information hub for NJ's Black communities
Camden Fireworks			\$64,460		Camden	To create a documentary, <i>A Deeper Bond</i> , highlighting the intricate relationships that sustain environmental work by Camden youth.
Camden Parent & Student Union			\$100,000	\$100,000	Camden	Civic education workshops on voting process, media literacy and community journalism
Center for Cooperative Media/ Montclair University - Research & Development		\$185,014	\$36,580		Statewide	Funding of a researcher for the Center's ongoing research of the NJ local news ecosystem
Center for Cooperative Media/ Montclair University - Spanish Translation			\$75,000	\$50,000	Statewide	Addressing the widening information gap for Spanish-speaking communities by providing translated versions of important statewide news stories.
Center for Cooperative Media/ Montclair University - SJIIEP	\$50,000		\$100,000	\$30,000	Essex	Funding and expansion of South Jersey Information Equity Project with five to 10 fellows
Center for Cooperative Media/ Montclair State University - Statewide Voting Guide			\$92,070		Statewide	Funding of 2023 statewide voters guide
Central Desi			\$81,066	\$100,000	Statewide	Fellowships for coverage of NJ South Asian American news
Central New Jersey Network				\$70,000	Somerset	Supports a non-profit community TV station based in Somerset County in expansion of programming and internships.
Civic News Company/Chalbeat Newark			\$100,000	\$100,000	Essex	Foster engagement in Newark public schools through in-depth reporting on school segregation and federal COVID spending
Clinton Hill Community Action		\$50,000	\$100,000	\$75,000	Essex	Funding a journalism project for neighborhood residents to use storytelling and news to inform the Clinton Hill Community.
coLAB Arts		\$40,000	\$100,000		Middlesex	Collaboration with New Brunswick Tomorrow to create community based memory and storytelling project
Conservatory of Music and Performing Arts Society	\$35,000				Mercer	Support of Let My People Learn-Historic project, allowing young people to learn about local governments
Corporation for New Jersey Local Media			\$86,459		Morris	Continuation of Northern NJ News Collaborative on its "Stormwater Matters" initiative
Cranford High School		\$35,000			Union	To build a robust digital journalism program at Cranford High School.
DataSource NJ, Inc.			\$50,000		Statewide	Prototyping of a depository of data information that will provide insights to reporters, activists, academics
Front Runner New Jersey		\$65,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	South Jersey	Coverage of African American and Latino communities in South Jersey.
Hammonton Gazette	\$34,765	\$35,000	\$21,800	\$92,478	Atlantic	Coverage of Spanish-speaking community, with Noticias, a Spanish-language publication
Hopeloft, Inc./ Follow South Jersey	\$35,000	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$94,690	Cumberland	Hopeloft's Follow Local News project actively recruits, trains, and equips youth and citizen journalists to write for its local news site, FollowSouthJersey.com.
Industry Media Arts			\$99,720	\$100,000	Ocean	Providing high school students with early awareness and readiness training for undergraduate collegiate journalism programs.
Infosystems		\$35,000			Mercer	Creating an educational, conversational, creative, and innovative digital think tank and learning house.
Jersey Bee/ Bloomfield Information Project	\$35,000	\$65,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Essex	News coverage of Bloomfield, Irvington, Newark, Orange and East Orange
Lens 15 Media		\$50,000			Essex	Launch of news agency to create multimedia reports about NJ residents with disabilities
Mental Health Association in New Jersey			\$75,000		Statewide	Research on how college students receive mental health assistance
Morristown Green		\$20,000	\$80,000		Morris	Expanding community news coverage of Greater Morristown.
Movimiento Coeche	\$35,000	\$50,000	\$100,000		Union	With Rutgers University, establishment of Radio Coeche, twice weekly Spanish language radio internet program
Newark News and Story Collaborative	\$35,000	\$75,000	\$100,000		Essex	Lab to train Newark's residents, local reporters and newsmakers on the city's news and information needs
Newark Water Coalition	\$34,930	\$35,000	\$65,000		Essex	Creation of Newark Community Voices, a digital and community program for youth
New Jersey Center for Investigative Reporting (NJ CIR) / The Jersey Vindicator		\$75,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Statewide	The ProPublica of New Jersey with investigative reports at the local, county and state levels
New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness			\$99,200		Statewide	Developing an advocacy and storytelling training program for New Jersey residents who have experienced homelessness and poverty.
New Jersey Council for Humanities and Journalism + Design		\$339,000		\$120,000	Statewide	Development of a statewide journalism program for community colleges
New Jersey Statehouse News Service				\$100,000	Statewide	Trains student journalists on professional government and politics from Trenton's statehouse, with stories for use by local independent NJ news outlets
New Jersey Urban News				\$100,000	Statewide	Provide coverage of New Jersey's vibrant African American community through informative stories and coverage
New Jersey YMCA State Alliance		\$35,000	\$100,000		Statewide	Funding of statewide storytelling project on NJ residents perspective on COVID-19 vaccination
New Labor			\$100,000	\$100,000	Middlesex	Funding to develop community journalists, focused on Black and Brown workers in low wage jobs across NJ
Old Bridge New Jersey Residents	\$35,000				Middlesex	Create searchable and comprehensive archive of county's local government archive over last two decades
Paterson Alliance	\$33,000				Passaic	Manage Paterson library information hub and to provide community training in citizen journalism
Public Square Amplified		\$50,000	\$125,000	\$120,000	Essex	Program to fund, recruit and train reporters in the Caribbean, African, Indigenous and immigrant communities
Radio Rouj & Bie		\$40,000			Essex	Enable Haitian community radio organization to create its own web site
Ridge View Echo Blairstown Enhancement Committee	\$35,000	\$40,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Warren	Coverage of rural Warren county communities of Blairstown, Frelinghuysen, Hardwick and Knowlton—after loss of local news outlets
Slice of Culture/ Saint Peter's University		\$40,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Hudson	Coverage of young BIPOC and immigrant communities in Jersey City and Hudson county
South Jersey Climate News Report		\$40,000	\$24,270		South Jersey	Provide stipends for students providing high-quality reports on climate change in South Jersey
Stories of Atlantic City, Stockton University	\$34,962	\$65,000			Atlantic	Initiative to pay community members to cover local government meetings
Targum Publishing Company				\$100,000	Middlesex	Supports Rutgers University's student run-news outlet, The Daily Tagum, in expanding its digital presence, seeking new advertisers, and supporting efforts to restore University funding.
Trenton Journal	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Mercer	Bridge information gaps and connect communities in Trenton area, with solution-based journalism
Two River Times				\$31,879	Monmouth	Transition to non-profit status
Unidad Latina en Acción New Jersey/ Radio Jornalera NJ		\$50,000	\$100,000	\$120,000	Statewide	Support the Radio Jornalera NJ Community Project, a independent media outlet focused on working class and highlighting community issues, amplifying voices, expressions and culture of laborers, immigrants and working class.
Vaccinate NJ.com	\$35,000				Statewide	Helps underserved communities—especially Spanish language communities—obtain information on vaccine locations and availability
Wayne Hills High School			\$10,591	\$25,000	Passaic	Digital journalism podcasting program for high school students in Wayne township
WNET/NJ Spotlight		\$50,000	\$100,000	\$100,000	Statewide	Health coverage of child welfare and mental health in underserved communities
WNET/NJ Spotlight			\$100,000	\$105,000	Statewide	Funding to hire a Washington DC-based correspondent for WNET NJ Spotlight news
VietLead			\$48,000		Statewide	Neighborhood listening sessions to learn about local issues in Black, Brown and Southeast Asian communities in East Camden
TOTAL	\$486,553	\$1,914,014	\$3,170,696	\$2,861,027		

Key			
2x grantee			
3x grantee			
4x grantee			

Note: Other Programs			
Blue Engine Technology and Sustainability Accelerator (2024)	\$210,000		(21 participants, including 11 NJCIC grantees)
Documentors Program (2024)	\$313,504		(Three regional sites)

Sources: NJCIC press releases and staff. Author's analysis.

Exhibit 6 Sampling of NCJIC grantee websites



Source: NJCIC grantee websites (Top, L-R: Jersey Vindicator, Ridge View Echo, Central Desi, Black in Jersey; Bottom, L-R: Jersey Bee, Atlantic City Focus, Trenton Journal, and Morristown Green)

Exhibit 7 NJCIC Board of Directors (December 2024)

Christopher J. Daggett	Chair	Independent consultant	Montclair State University
Therise Edwards	Vice Chair	President, Teshley Solutions, LLC	Public
Molly de Aguiar	Treasurer	President, Independence Public Media Foundation	State Assembly Speaker
John R.D. Celock	Secretary	President, Celock Media Group	State Senate Minority Leader
Kevin Belfield	Director	Dean, College of Science and Liberal Arts	New Jersey Institute of Technology
Carl Hausman	Director	Professor of Journalism	Rowan University
Audrey Kelly	Director	Executive Director, Kean Board of Trustees	Kean University
Maria Lopez-Nunez	Director	Deputy Director, Inbound Community Cooperation	Public
Jerome Montes	Director	Director of Outreach, Communications, and Marketing, NJ Citizen Action	Governor
Kim Pearson	Director	Professor of Journalism and Professional Writing	TCNJ
Marisol M. Peron	Director	SVP, Global Investor Relations and Communications, Genmab US, Inc.	Technology Sector
Charles W. Powers	Director	President, Bergen Grassroots, Inc.	State Senate President
Mike Rispoli	Director	News Voices Program Director, Free Press	Governor
Kevin J. Rooney	Director	Former NJ Assemblyman, District 40	State Assembly Minority Leader
Robin Wilson-Glover	Director	Director Digital Opinion, NJ Advance Media	Media Sector
Matthew Weber	Director	Professor of Journalism	Rutgers University
Staff			
Christopher J. Daggett	Interim Executive Director		
Ayinde Merrill	Program Partner		
Madison McCool	Grants and Communications Manager		
Lindsay McNamara	Development Associate		

Source: NJCIC

FOCUS AREAS

The Consortium's 2024 grantmaking focus areas fall under three categories:

Civic news and information reporting:

Initiatives focused on high-quality news reporting and dissemination of accurate, timely, verifiable information.

The journalism pipeline:

Organizations or projects that train students, professionals, and community members to produce news and civic information, enabling them to become community storytellers and newsroom reporters.

Civic engagement in New Jersey communities:

Organizations that actively encourage and support civic engagement, with an emphasis on historically marginalized and/or underserved communities with limited or no access to news and information.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Consortium seeks to support ideas and projects that achieve the following:

Perform a public service: Public funding for media in the United States historically has focused on supporting public-service news and information that fills gaps left by commercial media. The ongoing local news crisis in New Jersey has widened these gaps and left many communities without access to important information about where they live. The Consortium's grantmaking will continue the rich legacy of public funding for media by supporting news and information that performs a public service and supports civic engagement in media-deficient communities.

Center community information needs: People need access to a variety of news and information to have their basic needs met, to participate in their community and civic life, and to thrive and fully realize their potential. Too often, though, local media systems fail to meet people's information needs – such as reporting that demonstrates a problem without offering actionable solutions, lacking information sources in languages other than English, or disseminating news in ways that don't actually reach those who can benefit most. The information needs of New Jersey residents are at the center of The Consortium's work, and we will dedicate resources to projects that allow greater access to news and information that improve people's lives.

Support media that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive: A media system that does not reflect and lift up the rich racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of New Jersey cannot serve residents adequately. The Civic Information Consortium believes it is fundamental to support a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive media system in order to create more informed and engaged communities and build a future generation of media makers that look and sound like the residents they serve.

Promote media by, with, and for: It is essential that people can participate and lead in the creation of media. Listening, engagement, collaboration, and community ownership are essential priorities for the Consortium, and we will seek to support projects that democratize the journalistic and media-making process, promote equitable collaboration, center community participation and needs, and build the capacity for everyday people to help shape what local news looks like.

Provide training and education: Media is something we all consume, but doing so with rampant disinformation and misinformation available across platforms has promoted distrust in community institutions. Historically, the privilege of creating media has not been available to people of all backgrounds unless they have the resources to do so. Better understanding how media works and creating it go hand in hand. Teaching people how to discern fact from fiction, responsibly consume media, and tell their own stories with impact is critical to strengthening news and information at the community level.

Strengthen networks and infrastructure: No single outlet or project alone will be able to improve access to local news and information in New Jersey. Many conditions are required to create more informed communities and sustainable local media across the state. Efforts that build capacity, promote learning and cross-sector collaboration, and provide essential services are necessary to support those performing the essential functions of journalism and media-making.

Source: *NJCIC*

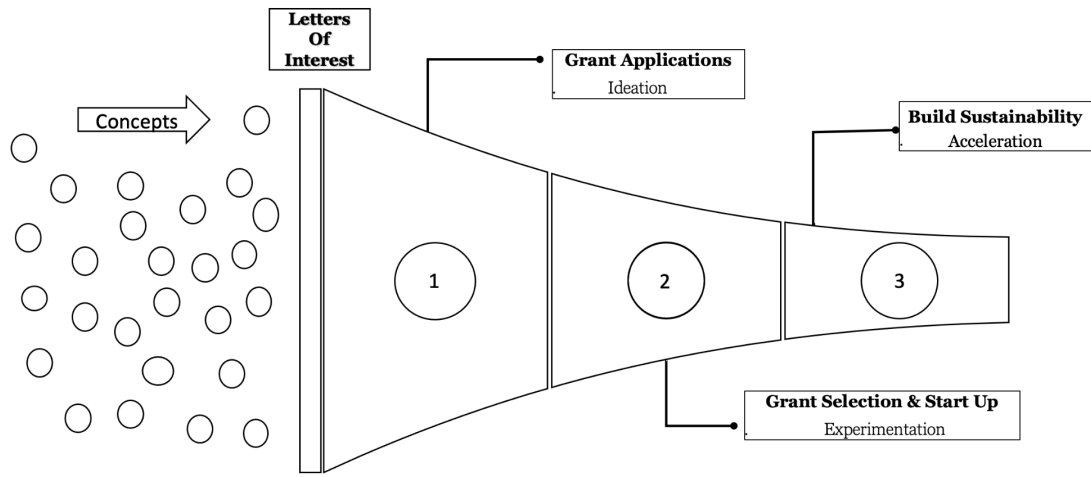
Exhibit 9 State Legislation to Support Local News (2017-2022)

Overview of State Legislation to Support Local News (2017-2022)

Bill	State	Year Introduced	Mechanism	Status
AB4933	New Jersey	2017	General funding	Carried over to AB3628, SB2317
SB3303	New Jersey	2017	General funding	Substituted— AB3628
AB3628	New Jersey	2018	General funding	Enacted
SB2317	New Jersey	2018	General funding	Substituted AB3628
H181	Massachusetts	2019	Task force/commission	Failed
S80	Massachusetts	2019	Task force/commission	Failed
H4887	Massachusetts	2020	Task force/commission	Substituted— H5250
H5250	Massachusetts	2020	Task force/commission	Enacted
SB3457	Illinois	2020	Task force/commission	Failed
SB134	Illinois	2021	Task force/commission	Enacted
LD1462	Maine	2021	Tax incentives	Failed
AB8258	New York	2021	Tax incentives	In committee
SB7544	New York	2021	Tax incentives	In committee
AB8585	New York	2021	Tax incentives	In committee
SB7510	New York	2021	Task force/commission	In committee
AB8471	New York	2021	Task force/commission	In committee
AB128	California	2021	General funding	Enacted
AB179	California	2021	General funding	Enacted
SB911	California	2022	Tax incentives	Failed
AB762	Wisconsin	2021	Tax incentives	Failed
SB834	Wisconsin	2022	Tax incentives	Failed
HB1121	Colorado	2022	Advertising allocation; Tax incentives	Died in committee
HB1217	Virginia	2022	Tax incentives	Died in committee
SB5541	Washington	2022	Tax incentives	Died in committee

Source: “An Overview of State and Local Legislation to Support Local News: Policy Mechanisms and Challenges to Impact,” Jessica Mahone, *Annals, AAAPS*, 707, May 2023, page 49. (Note: An update on the status of statewide local news bills is provided on this online [tracker](#) page by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

Exhibit 10 NJCIC's systematic approach



Source: Authors' analysis

Exhibit 11 NJCIC’s 2024-26 Strategic Plan

<p>MISSION</p> <p>Providing financial resources to support and grow trustworthy, community-based news and information sources throughout New Jersey.</p> <p>VISION</p> <p>Every person in New Jersey has access to thriving, representative local news and information that enhances their lives and communities.</p> <p>VALUES</p> <p>We believe...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone deserves trustworthy, representative sources of news and information. Trusted, accurate, and representative news and information is empowering – and critical to a multi-racial democracy. Collaboration, transparency, and sustained funding are key to building thriving news outlets and lead to a more informed and civically engaged New Jersey. Equity, accessibility and justice are essential to effective grantmaking. 	<h2 style="text-align: center;">2024-2026 STRATEGIC ROADMAP</h2>			
<p style="text-align: center;">PRIORITIES & STRATEGIES</p>				
<p>Diverse, thriving grantees addressing the needs of underserved communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solidify grantmaking approach to ensure grant applicants represent underserved communities from across the state Support development of outlets and providers in communities with limited to no access to news and information, to encourage civic engagement and dialogue Connect grantees to capacity building resources and training Invest in research and practices that connect media outlets to audiences Enhance partnerships with universities 	<p>Consortium financial sustainability and growth for increased impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build financial sustainability by increasing public and private funding Ensure strong financial practices Hire a full-time Executive Director Meaningfully engage key constituents to support fundraising and advocacy Develop and maintain a diverse, high-performing Board and staff Support grantee impact reporting and share what’s working 	<p>Visibility and advocacy for the Consortium, its partners, and the evolving news and information needs of New Jersey’s communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand communications team to clarify and promote the Consortium’s mission Promote grantee impact to increase support for local news and information Work with partners, grantees, funders, and policymakers to build awareness and advocacy across the state 	<p style="text-align: center;">OUTCOMES</p> <p>PEOPLE Residents value local news and take action to support it</p> <p>COMMUNITIES All communities have accessible, trustworthy, representative news and information</p> <p>ECOSYSTEM Connected, collaborative, and thriving local news outlets across New Jersey</p> <p>NEW JERSEY A more informed and civically engaged state</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">PERFORMANCE MEASURES OF THE CONSORTIUM</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50% of grant applicants who represent underserved communities across the state 50% of projects support BIPOC led outlets and 75% in low income and underserved communities 3-5 outlets and providers supported in communities with no access to news and information 10% increase in number of stories published 75% of grantees actively engaged with university partners 85% of grantees still in operation after 3 years 75% of grantees increase revenue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$5M in total annual revenue \$3M of multi-year funding secured 30% of total revenue from private philanthropy 70% of total revenue from public funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased public awareness of importance of local news and information 7-10 annual earned media/press opportunities for Consortium 50% increase in philanthropic support for news and information across NJ 		

Source: NJCIC

TRENTON JOURNAL

Grantee Spotlight

February 6, 2025

By Dickson L. Louie
& Marisa Porto



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“Bridging information gaps and amplifying positive voices in the Capital City.”
– Trenton Journal tagline, 2024

Overview of the Trenton Journal and news coverage area

Kenneth Miles believed that his adopted hometown of Trenton was never given its due. He wanted to help change the city’s narrative. “I think people have a misconception about New Jersey’s capital that paints the town in a bad light,” wrote the Trenton Journal (trentonjournal.com) founder and publisher in his 2021 New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC) grant application. “As a resident of the city, Trenton is rich in history, culture, and diversity and our editorial content aims to reflect that.” Primarily focused on solutions-based journalism—defined as “news reporting that focuses on the responses to social issues as well as the problems themselves”¹— the hyperlocal site’s stories are told through a network of paid freelance writers, photographers, graphic designers, and social media marketers in the local Trenton area. The Trenton Journal then tells these stories on multiple platforms: website (see **Exhibit TJ-1**), e-newsletter (see **Exhibit TJ-2**), podcasts, and social media. To further engage the community, it also holds virtual and live events.

“The news market in Trenton is really a poster child for what has happened across the country,” said Stefanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. “Here we have a state capital that used to be flush with reporters covering statewide issues, as well as two strong, local, competing daily newspapers. It is also important to note that Trenton is a primarily Black and brown city. However, as news organizations across the state have contracted, they have pulled reporters from the state capital and the state house press corps is substantially smaller than it was just five or 10 years ago. The same has happened to the two dailies; each of those newspapers has shrunk considerably and coverage of important local issues is almost nonexistent, save for big crime, traffic, or major city council happenings.”²

Located in Mercer County, Trenton has a population of almost 90,000. According to the 2024 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the city is 44% Hispanic or Latino; 43% Black; 12% White; 1% Asian. Nearly 11% say they are two races or more. About 30% of Trenton’s population is foreign-born.³ Approximately 61% live below the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) line⁴, nearly double the 31% average ALICE rate in Mercer County.⁵

¹ Definition of solutions journalism, Wikipedia.

² Murray emails to author, June 26, 2024, and January 23, 2024.

³ United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, July 1, 2024 estimate, Trenton, New Jersey, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/trentoncitynewjersey,US/PST045224>

⁴ ALICE is an economic measure of the number of individuals and families who are working and above the Federal Poverty Level, but earning less than the cost of making ends meet.

⁵ Trenton Health Team, “For The Health of Trenton 2022,”

<https://trentonhealthteam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Updated.2022.Trenton-HealthTeam.-CHNA-Summary.pdf>

Getting started

In the 2021 grant application, the 43-year-old Miles described the Trenton Journal as a source “to help Trentonians find resources and fill in critical information needs, such as affordable housing, solutions to close the digital divide in Trenton’s public schools, and exploring the disparity of Trenton’s Black and brown communities signing up for the Covid-19 vaccine.” He started the Trenton Journal in January 2021 after moving his family to the area during the pandemic.

“When my family and I moved here,” said Miles, a Garden State native, “a lot of places were closed. I didn’t have the opportunity to meet other people. Many people were still wearing masks, socially distancing themselves from one another. I couldn’t get a real sense of what the city was like, other than what people told me about it.”⁶

As a result, he launched the Trenton Journal, first as a monthly newsletter and then expanded it into a website with a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram (see **Exhibit TJ-3**) and YouTube. Before moving to Trenton, Miles worked as collaborative consultant for the Center for Cooperative Media during 2020-21 and was encouraged by Murray “to go for it” and launch the Trenton Journal. The newsletter itself ⁷ “started out small and started off slow,” said Miles. “And, that was one of the best pieces of advice that I received.”⁸

For Miles, the Trenton Journal meant returning to his career interest in journalism decades earlier. As a 15-year-old, he was hired by *The Jersey Journal*—a name the Trenton Journal pays homage to—to be a youth columnist for the paper. Displaying entrepreneurial spunk, he had obtained the job by writing to the editor of *The Jersey Journal* about the need to connect with younger readers.

“It showed me the power of words, the power of communication, the importance of someone like me, a young 15-year-old African American male living in Jersey City, having a platform to express his feelings, to express what my peers were thinking at the time,” recalled Miles. “I had a voice and a platform, and it gave me that. I would get letters in the mail from different readers, letting me know how much they enjoyed my column, and I loved that exchange. I just thought I was writing for myself. But people were letting me know that they were reading my work.”⁹

After a stint as a founding partner in a coworking space start-up in Newark for several years, the work with the Center reignited his passion for journalism. Miles initially paid local writers and photographers out of his own pocket before receiving an initial grant of \$35,000 in 2021 from the Consortium to help shoulder some of the expenses. The Trenton Journal was one of NJCIC’s original 14 grantees. Since that first 2021 grant, the Trenton Journal has received three subsequent NJCIC grants: \$35,000 in 2022; \$100,000 in 2023; and \$120,000 in 2024.

⁶ Miles interview with author, March 4, 2024.

⁷ Miles interview with author, March 4, 2024.

⁸ Miles interview with author, March 4, 2024.

⁹ Miles interview with author, March 4, 2024.

Community impact

In December 2024, the Trenton Journal had about 20,000 viewers a month on trentonjournal.com; a weekly email newsletter, published on Fridays, had 3,100 subscribers; an Instagram following of 1,900; and a Facebook page with nearly 7,000 followers.

Wrote one newsletter subscriber: “I am delighted to receive your email. I lived in Trenton for many years and was fortunate to have been one of the new owners in ‘Mill Hill.’ I am in Florida now, retired. If there is anything I can do to help or offer, please let me know. Congratulations and success. Wish I was still there, I would love to be involved!”¹⁰

Miles was also active in promoting journalism training at the high school level. This training reflected Miles’ experience. While a teenager, he attended Saturday journalism training programs sponsored by the New York Association of Black Journalists at Long Island University in Brooklyn. Miles considered these to be milestones in his professional career.

“I wanted to implement something like that,” said Miles. “And, we did it with the [‘My Trenton Story’](#) high school journalism workshops where we trained local high school students on writing, editing, researching, podcasting and how to tell their own stories about what life is like growing up in Trenton.”¹¹

To raise its profile and to further engage the Trenton community, the Trenton Journal also has held virtual and live events. For example, in Fall 2022, it partnered with the local NAACP chapter to host a candidate forum and promote voter registration. In Summer 2024, Apple News also began to distribute the Trenton Journal’s stories.

“I can’t do it on my own. Being a publisher, being an entrepreneur, and being Black in business, the odds are stacked against me,” added Miles. “And, I know that in order to make what I’m doing work, I’ve got to be willing to work with other people who share my vision.”¹²

As a result of these efforts, Miles believes that the Trenton Journal has created community trust. Readers often contact him because they believe the Trenton Journal will tell their stories accurately and fairly.

One story that Miles has been proud of is the one he wrote in March 2024, [“A House Divided: When plans for a transitional house in Trenton’s historical district become too close for comfort.”](#) Miles noted: “I received a lot of responses from that story, including a mention from a preacher in a [sermon that was recorded on Facebook](#) (Note: at the 9:36 minute mark).”

¹⁰ Reader note to the Trenton Journal.

¹¹ Miles interview with co-author, March 4, 2024.

¹² Miles interview with co-author, March 4, 2024.

In addition, the Trenton Journal published its first magazine in 2023, focusing on the Trenton arts community, immigration issues, and local small businesses. Since then, two other magazines have been published. The second one focused on social justice activism and the third one will be on housing.

In a March 2023 needs assessment conducted by Sarah Stonbely for the Center for Cooperative Media, “about 45% of [84] survey respondents use Trenton Journal social media accounts at least weekly, and 68% visit at least a few times a month. The other newspapers we asked about—*The Trentonian*, *Trenton Daily*, and the *Times of Trenton*—ranked lower in satisfaction. These may be secondary sources for some of the Journal’s readers.”¹³

“I will say the [NJCIC] grant has given me the opportunity to produce news that helps to address the information gaps within the city of Trenton and to highlight the positive voices within the community,” said Miles. “The grant has [also] given me the opportunity to be true to myself as a publisher without being beholden to anyone within this city. It has also given me the opportunity to employ other people within the city. That’s something that I’m very proud of.”

In October 2024, Press Forward announced that the Trenton Journal would receive \$100,000 in additional funding as one of 205 recipients nationwide. The grant was part of its 2024 Open Call, entitled Closing Local Coverage Gaps. Press Forward is a coalition of numerous major foundations—including MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Democracy Fund—that raised \$500 million to support local media nationwide over five years. Miles hopes to use funds from this Press Forward grant to hire freelancers and expand the media outlet’s coverage.

What’s next?

As for the future, Miles foresees holding more events to connect with the community, adding more workshops to train young journalists, and creating new podcasts to reflect the diversity of voices in the Trenton community.

“As a publisher and as a journalist, we have to embrace the change, not say to ourselves, ‘this is how it used to be,’” said Miles. “People are getting news from different sources in different ways. I’ve heard it said before, and I agree, there’s a democratization that’s going on with the news. It’s not just these gatekeepers anymore holding news and information. Now, everybody can get information, some of which is misinformation, which is not good. But you just don’t have that one source anymore. You have multiple sources. And, you have to embrace the changes in reader behavior and technology,”¹⁴

Miles, who also plans to write a book on his experiences of running a multimedia publication in Trenton, called *From Ink to Impact*, added. “I want [the Trenton Journal]

¹³ Sarah Stonbely, “Information Needs Assessments of Three New Jersey Communities,” Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, March 2023, page 23.

¹⁴ Miles interview with author, March 4, 2024.

to become sustainable first and outlive me. And I want it to keep going. What I envision for the Trenton Journal moving forward is to be owned and run by the community. I'm proud of what we've accomplished within the four years since we began publishing. I just want to make this a financially viable product that's well produced and a benefit to the city."¹⁵

¹⁵ Miles interview with author, November 27, 2024.

Exhibit TJ-1 Trenton Journal Home Page (September 10, 2024)

Trenton Journal

[Stories](#) ▾ [Resources](#) [Events](#) [Newsletter](#) [About Us](#) ▾

Subscribe to the Trenton Journal

Receive our weekly roundup with events, resources and community news from Trenton, New Jersey.

[Subscribe](#)



Hamilton To Honor Local Businesses and Leaders at Economic Development Commission's Awards Dinner

BY TRENTON JOURNAL • EVENTS • SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

Mayor Jeff Martin and the Hamilton Township Economic Development Advisory Commission (HTEDAC) have announced the 48th Annual Distinguished Business Achievement Awards Dinner date and 2024 award recipients. The annual awards dinner will occur on Thursday, October 24, 2024, at The Stone Terrace by John Henry's located at 2275 Kuser Road, Hamilton, NJ 08690, beginning with [...]






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Latest in Sports


-  **SF 49er and Trenton native, J'Quan "Big" Brown, to receive key to the city**
-  **Award-winning diving coach teaches local students how to become champions**
-  **The highly anticipated Ropes Course at Mercer County Park is set to open**

Source: Trenton Journal

Exhibit TJ-2 Trenton Journal email newsletter




Keeping you informed on what's going on in and around the capital city.



Happy Friday Trentonians,


Welcome to the weekend! We have some great information for you about upcoming local events, new groundbreaking county offices, volunteer opportunities, and much more. Click below to see it all.

What Trenton is Reading



Beginning November 4, 2024, through January 3, 2025, bagged leaf collection will take place in the [City of Trenton](#). Leaves may be placed curbside in plastic bags (preferably clear) or open rigid containers with handles. No more than 20 bags or containers can be placed curbside with weight not exceeding 50 pounds each. Place leaves at curbside the day after your normally scheduled garbage collection day. If collection day is Saturday, pick-up will be the next business day. Bagged leaves expedite collection and alleviates street flooding.

[Click here to read full story](#)



TRENTON PREMIERES

Passage THEATRE COMPANY 40th ANNIVERSARY SEASON

Alma

by Benjamin Benne
Directed by AZ Espinoza

Heritage. Healing. Home.

October 4-20, 2024

Scan me for tickets or visit www.passagetheatre.org

Use code **TJOURNAL15** for 15% off all tickets to ALMA!

[Buy Now](#)

Source: Trenton Journal

Exhibit TJ-3 Trenton Journal Instagram page



Source: Trenton Journal

SLICE OF CULTURE

at St. Peter's University

Grantee Spotlight

February 6, 2025

By Dickson L. Louie
& Marisa Porto



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“From Hudson County, New Jersey To Around the Globe,
Get Your Slice of Culture.”
— Slice of Culture Tagline

Overview of Slice of Culture and news coverage area

In 2020, believing that the audiences of BIPOC, immigrant, and Generation Z readers in Hudson County, New Jersey—located just across the Hudson River from Manhattan (**Exhibit SOC-1**)—were often being overlooked by local legacy media, such as *The Jersey Journal*, two 20-something and newly-minted college graduates decided to do something about it. Neidy Gutierrez and Adrienne J. Romero launched Slice of Culture (sliceofculture.com and **Exhibit SOC-2**), a hyper-local news site that would better address those audiences’ news and information needs, using different multimedia storytelling techniques across multiple social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Slice of Culture’s editorial content includes a mix of local news, culture and opinion. Its topics often focus on civic engagement, the BIPOC community, local events, Generation Z tips, and social inequality.

Hudson County, home to Jersey City, is one of the most diverse counties in a very diverse, but also segregated state. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 population estimates, New Jersey has a population mix of 52% White, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 16% Black, and 11% Asian.¹ By comparison, in 2024, Hudson County is 29% White, 41%, Hispanic or Latino, 16% Black, and 18% Asian.² Approximately 42% of the county’s population of 708,000 was born outside of the United States—over three times the national average of 13.6%.³ Almost one-quarter of the county's population is between the ages of 20 and 34.⁴

“Jersey City is one of the largest cities in our state, with more than a quarter of a million people living there,” said Stefanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. “For many years, it has been fairly well served by *The Jersey Journal*, which is owned by Advance Newspapers, which announced that it's closing the paper. That creates a vacuum for sure, but there are several news organizations still operating there, including the *Jersey City Times* and TAPinto Jersey City. There are some ethnic media organizations operating in Jersey City, as well as some hyper-local news organizations, such as the *Jersey City Times*. Media out of New York City also cover Jersey City, since so many people

¹United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, state of New Jersey, population estimate, July 1, 2024. Totals may exceed 100% due to responses to multiple races.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NJ,US/PST045224>

² United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts, Hudson County New Jersey population estimate, July 1, 2024. Totals may exceed 100% due to responses to multiple races.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hudsoncountynewjersey,US/PST045224>

³ Pulos, Chelsea, “Hudson County Immigration at a Crossroads Thus 2024 Election,” Slice of Culture, September 20, 2024.

⁴ Our Changing Population: Hudson County, New Jersey, USA Facts,

<https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/population-and-demographics/our-changing-population/state/new-jersey/county/hudson-county/>

commute back-and-forth. However, there is a lot of room for new media in the city, especially media that can reach young people—which is what Slice of Culture does.”⁵

Getting Started

In the spring of 2020, during the COVID pandemic, Gutierrez and Romero, both from immigrant families, first generation college students, and reporters and editors of their college newspaper, were about to graduate from St. Peter’s University.⁶ With job prospects looking bleak due to a region-wide shut down, they decided to launch a website instead, with the support and guidance of their two journalism faculty advisors, Ernabel Demillo and Georgia Kral. The site launched on June 1st that year. Thirteen months later, Slice of Culture won the Best Grassroots Journalism Award from the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists for 2021, which “goes to the print weekly or local website that does the best, most comprehensive job covering the community which it serves.”⁷

“We were obviously scared to enter the job market with everything being shut down,” said Gutierrez. “Adrienne previously worked for about three years at *The Jersey Journal*. In her time there, we both noticed that there wasn’t any main coverage in the specific [immigrant and BIPOC] areas of Hudson County...And the limited coverage available normally was just crimes or negative stories. And we knew that there was so much more than that in Hudson County. So, we decided to start Slice of Culture and to share the stories of different cultures, communities, and people, because we come from so many places, so many backgrounds. Everyone’s different, and everyone’s story is so incredible...So, that’s sort of what started the journey.”⁸

In their original 2022 application for a grant from the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC), the two co-founders of Slice of Culture described the outlet as “a group of BIPOC storytellers who want to bring a slice of civic engagement to Jersey City and Hudson County through a series of how-to projects and informational stories targeted to immigrant families and communities of color. It is opening doors to aspiring journalists who are committed to strong, local journalism and stories that matter to the community.” The application also observed that “many BIPOC residents and immigrants [in Hudson County] do not participate in elections or civic life because they lack the education or resources to understand that their voices have importance in their communities. Although Hudson County is [one of] the most diverse counties in the United States, there is a sense of division because of the lack of coverage, resources and education.”

To address these concerns, the founders were determined that the team should reflect their community. Their current 26-member team is primarily people of color (see **Exhibit SOC-3**) and representative of the audiences they are trying to reach.

⁵ Murray emails to co-author, June 26, 2024, and January 21, 2024.

⁶ Also nationally known for its men’s basketball team making an upstart surprising Elite Eight finish in March 2022.

⁷ Slice of Culture website, Our Accomplishments, <https://www.sliceofculture.com/about/>

⁸ Gutierrez interview with author, March 12, 2024.

“Journalism has a branding problem,” Demillo said. “Slice of Culture is changing this image with the young people. Not every Gen Z person I teach knows what a newspaper is or follows the news on radio or television. Slice of Culture’s sweet sauce is they know how to engage a younger audience. They have a dedicated group of young people producing it. Both Adrienne and Neidy are young and from this local community [and that is a plus]...Their enthusiasm gets young people excited.”⁹

The co-founders initially envisioned the site to be primarily food-related, focusing on cuisines from different cultures—hence the “Slice of Culture” name—but the news of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protest made them “shift gears” and, according to Romero, become “a platform for the community to get these underrepresented voices heard.”¹⁰

After being informed by their journalism advisors about the NJCIC grants, the founders of Slice of Culture applied for and received an initial grant of \$40,000 in 2022. A second NJCIC grant of \$100,000 followed in 2023, and a third one of \$120,000 in 2024.

When she got the news of the first grant, Gutierrez cried.

“[The NJCIC grant] gave us a big boost of confidence in having an organization like the Consortium believe in our mission and want to support what we’re doing for our community,” Gutierrez said. “It helped us bring in community members to be storytellers and tell stories of what issues are happening in the community, things that are affecting the public. And, right now, with the [2023 grant], we’ll be able to focus more time on Slice of Culture, because beforehand, obviously, with no income coming in or just nothing to sustain ourselves, we had to juggle this with full time jobs. At this time, we were able to dedicate so much more time to our work. In the last couple of months, we’ve grown tremendously in followers, but also in those connections with the [community], because bottom line, one of our major goals is to become a publication that the community trusts that they can go to.”¹¹

The NJCIC grant enabled Slice of Culture to pay stipends to the two co-founders and its team. The grant also paid for expenses related to starting a newsletter (**Exhibit SOC-4**), supporting the website, and purchasing office supplies.

Growth and community impact

Across multiple platforms, Slice of Culture tells its stories on its website, Instagram (**Exhibit SOC-5**), Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Since receiving a Consortium grant in 2022, Slice of Culture’s audience has grown tremendously. Before the initial NJCIC grant, Slice of Culture had an average website audience of about 580 monthly sessions, an average of 1,263 Instagram monthly reel views, and roughly 600

⁹ Demillo interview with author, December 6, 2024.

¹⁰ Romero interview with author, March 12, 2024.

¹¹ Gutierrez interview with author, March 12, 2024.

Instagram followers. By the end of 2024, Slice of Culture had an average website audience of 5,613 monthly sessions, an average of 4,282 Instagram monthly reel views, and 2,600 Instagram followers.¹²

“The response from the public indicates that Slice of Culture’s approach is worthy of consideration,” said Hanna Siemaszko, a research analyst at the Center for Cooperative Media, who tracks the impact of NJCIC’s grantees.¹³

Wrote one reader: “In every way showing diversity, from the staff to the stories they share. It’s so powerful to see that people have somewhere to share their business, journey & who they are to the world. Slice of Culture is part of something so much bigger & they are making a difference and I love to see it.”¹⁴

Added another: “Slice of Culture’s movement is one like no other! I love the connections I have built with them & the exposure that they constantly push out. You guys are killing it by changing the game of journalism. Proud of you and continue the amazing success.”¹⁵

Story ideas are “pouring in from community members, suggesting that Slice of Culture reporting is not only seen as fact-based but also as trustworthy,” Siemaszko observed.¹⁶

Siemaszko cited several examples of story tips. In one case, the People's Park Foundation asked the news outlet to cover [differing perspectives on the Liberty State Park project](#), a contentious debate in New Jersey about the restoration of a state park. Another tip led to a story about Puerto Rican percussionist [Little Johnny Rivero](#), whose work was chronicled with a story and video about his music and life. In a third example, a graduate from Memorial High in West New York, N.J. asked Slice of Culture to write about [a new soccer coach](#) who improved the school’s program using a coaching style that drastically improved morale. The story was shared 55 times on Instagram.¹⁷

Another example of Slice of Culture’s impact is that it won several awards from the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists for coverage provided through the grant. Reporter Kevin Guevara won a first place award for best digital news video for, “Rafiq’z Hair Cutters,” and Romero won second place in sports for [“Undefeated Middleweight Steven Cosme Gets Toughness From New Jersey, Seeks To Continue Puerto Rico’s Boxing Legacy.”](#)¹⁸

¹² Romero emails to author, January 14, 2025, and January 23, 2025.

¹³ Hanna Simaeszko, Slice of Culture Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹⁴ Reader note to Slice of Culture.

¹⁵ Reader note to Slice of Culture.

¹⁶ Hanna Simaeszko, Slice of Culture Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹⁷ Hanna Simaeszko, Slice of Culture Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹⁸ Hanna Simaeszko, Slice of Culture Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

One of the site's more recent and most popular features is [Hudson County News Roundup](#), launched in Fall 2024, which the founders say made readers more appreciative of Slice of Culture, especially with the planned closing of the *Jersey Journal* in February 2025. Following up on local news stories has also differentiated Slice of Culture from other local competitors.

What's next?

Gutierrez and Romero—also both graduates of the 100-day Entrepreneurial Journalism Creators program at Newmark School of Journalism at City University of New York (CUNY)—noted that sustainability, with multi-revenue streams, is an important focus.

“We’re looking for different grants or funding opportunities that we can apply to,” said Romero, “in addition to trying to build organic [advertising] revenue through our marketing and sales person. Basically, the model that we kind of decided on is going to local businesses and offering them a space on our platform, but for an affordable rate. A lot of times, local publications here charge a hefty amount, and realistically, a lot of people just don’t have that money. [In addition to] the grants we’re also trying for, [we plan to host] community events at an affordable admission for vendors and people. So we’re trying to find a happy medium there.”¹⁹

“Like most media sites, their goal is to find a way to monetize their news site, which, as we know, is quite difficult in today’s climate.” said Demillo. “Among the different business models they are exploring to ensure long-term financial sustainability include sponsorships, advertising, syndication, donations, grants—or a combination of all five.”²⁰

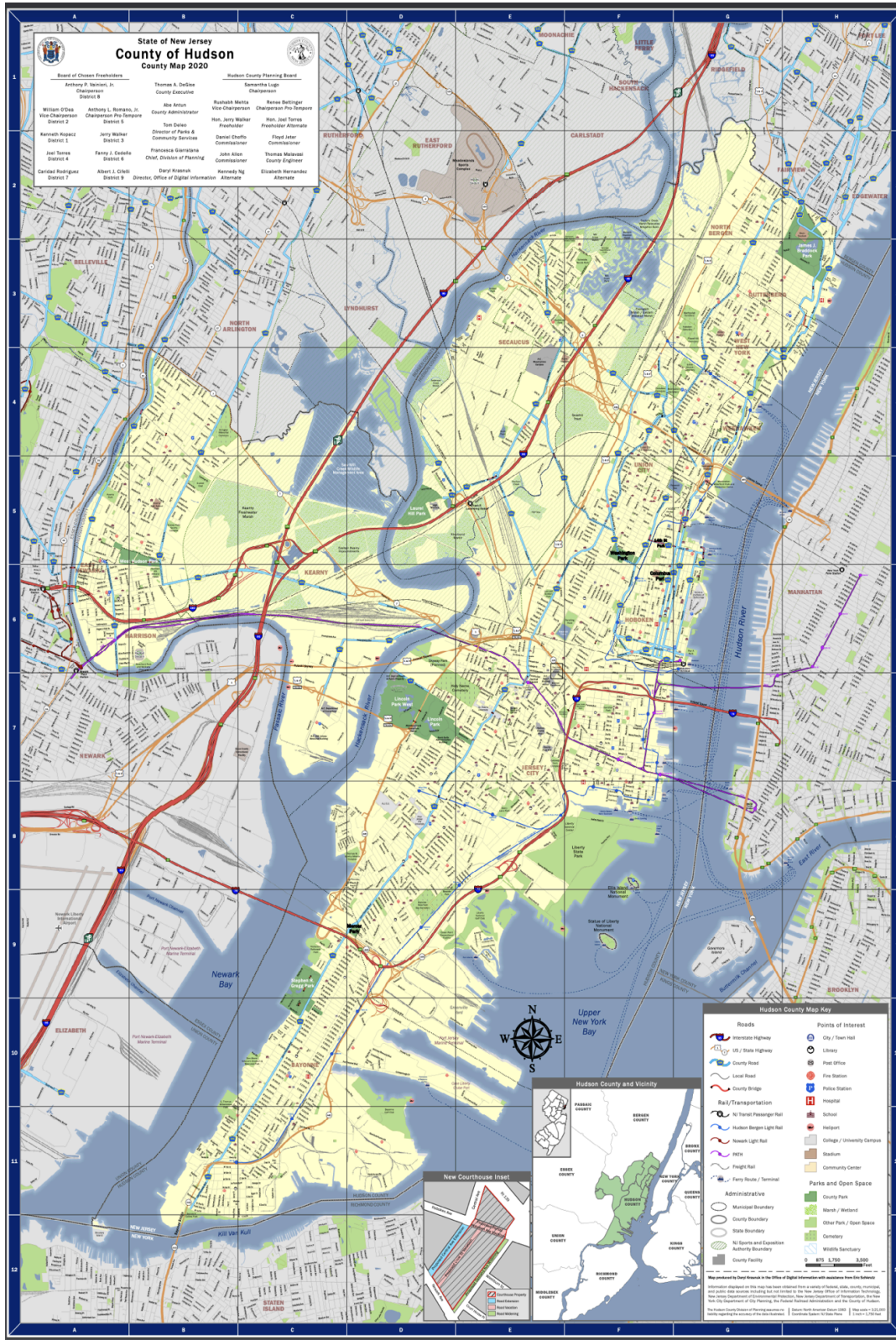
“What they are doing is old-school journalism coverage, but in a modern way for a younger audience,” said Kral, Slice of Culture’s other journalism co-advisor. “They are filling a need for an audience that doesn’t consume news in the way that people used to.”²¹

¹⁹ Romero interview with author, December 4, 2024.

²⁰ Demillo interview with author, April 17, 2024.

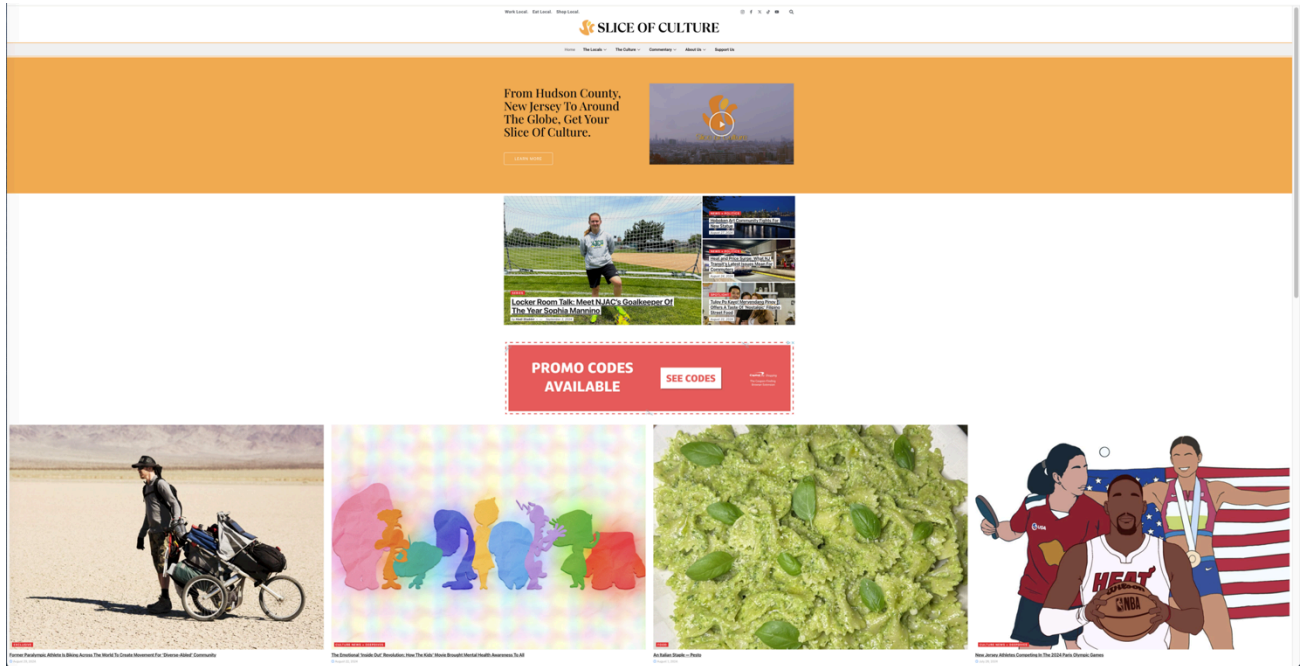
²¹ Kral interview with author, April 17, 2024.

Exhibit SOC-1 Hudson County, New Jersey



Source: County of Hudson, New Jersey (public domain usage)



























Exhibit SOC-2 Slice of Culture Home Page



Source: Slice of Culture

Exhibit SOC-3 Slice of Culture team (September 2024)

The Team

 ADRIENNE J. ROMERO CO-FOUNDER @ X	 NEIDY GUTIERREZ CO-FOUNDER @ X	 AMANDA SANCHEZ GRAPHIC DESIGNER @ X	 MARIA SANCHEZ MARKETING MANAGER @ X
 SAKURA SIEGEL ILLUSTRATOR @	 ALYSSA BELLO WRITER @	 SHIVA PRAKASH DATA ANALYST / DATA VISUALIZATION @	
 VICTORIA BISHOP-SMITH WRITER @	 ALDWIN ROMERO CONTRIBUTING WRITER @		
 ED DANIEL CONTRIBUTING WRITER @	 JOY OLIVERAS WRITER @	 EVA REID WRITER @ X	
 DANIELLA MENDEZ MENTAL HEALTH COLUMNIST @ X	 MARK ROTUNDO WRITER @	 JOHN LYNCH CONTRIBUTING WRITER @	
 KEVIN GUEVARA CREATIVE DIRECTOR @	 JAIS BENNY WEB DEVELOPER @		
 GABRIELLE SHEEHAN WRITER @	 KIMBERLY JARAMILLO GRAPHIC DESIGNER @	 GUS NATIONS WRITER @	
 JOEY CARUSO WRITER / VIDEOGRAPHER @	 HADI SHABBIR WRITER @	 CHELSEA PUJOLS COMMUNITY STORYTELLER INTERN @	
 TRISTAN BENITEZ COMMUNITY STORYTELLER INTERN @	 XAVIER BOONE CONTRIBUTING WRITER @	 EMMA FERSCHWEILER CONTRIBUTING WRITER @	


A digital exhibit, Slice of Culture, was given a big shout-out from the Dean's Office.

Source: Slice of Culture


Exhibit SOC-4 Slice of Culture newsletter

📧 📧 📧 📧 📧 📧

Slice of Culture



Hey Adrienne,
¡Feliz Mes de la Herencia Hispana!



Did we make you hungry with these photos? 🍪


As we've said it before, one of our favorite ways of celebrating culture is by eating foods from different countries. Lucky for us, Hudson County is filled with many restaurants.

Fun fact: the Hispanic population makes up [22.5% of Hudson County!](#) Even if you're not good at math (like most journalists) @ you can tell that's a lot.

While it is a month-long celebration, in places like Hudson County, we never stop honoring our Latin community! Let's take a look at an exclusive interview with a local Latin-owned business, resources for wellness and entrepreneurs and another gift from us! 🎁

Wine and Design Weehawken Is Hosting Latin Inspired Paint Parties And A Mercado

By: Nely Gutierrez



Wine and Design Weehawken has been providing a space for locals to unwind and have fun since 2018.

But over the years, Wine and Design Weehawken has become much more than a paint and sip studio. First time business owner, Jessal Lucero, co-owner of Wine and Design Weehawken, has made it his mission to create a space where locals, especially the Hispanic community can showcase their art, products and culture.


[Read The Full Feature](#)

Whether you're an entrepreneur looking for funding, a parent looking for employment, health insurance or children assistance, Hudson County and New Jersey have a handful of resources.

Here's where you can check them out:

- [North Hudson Community Action Corporation](#)
3321 Broadway, West New York, NJ 07093
(201) 210-0200 - provides health care services, low-cost child care from bilingual caregivers and more.
- [Entrepreneurial Association for Community Organization \(EACO\)](#)
390 Main St, Jersey City, NJ 07302
(201) 963-8282 - provides individual and group counseling for adults, housing assistance, job development and more.
- [New York University](#)
138 39th Street, Union City, NJ 07087
(201) 271-7474 - provides health services, educational and employment resources, business development and more.
- [NJ Economic Development Association](#)
(844) 963-1225 - Their Small Business Fund assists minority-owned or women-owned businesses.

Know more resources? Email us at info@sliceofculture.com!



Source: Slice of Culture

Exhibit SOC-5 Slice of Culture Instagram Page (September 2024)

The screenshot displays the Instagram profile for @sliceofculture. At the top, the Instagram logo is on the left, and 'Log In' and 'Sign Up' buttons are on the right. The profile header includes the name 'sliceofculture', 'Follow' and 'Message' buttons, and statistics: '1,394 posts', '2,383 followers', and '452 following'. The bio identifies it as a 'News & media website' serving 'a slice of culture from NJ' based in Hudson County, with links to 'The Locals + The Culture', 'Best Grassroots...', and 'Ink.bio/sliceofculture'. Below the bio is a navigation menu with seven circular icons: 'HUDSON COUNTY', 'ABOUT US', 'JERSEY FEATURES', 'UPCOMING EVENTS', 'Eat Local', 'SUPPORT LOCAL', and 'HUDSON COUNTY LOCALS'. The main content area shows a grid of 12 posts. The posts include: a profile picture post; a 'What's Happening?' roundup for Hudson County; 'MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL DANCE PROJECT'; 'BREAKING INDIGENOUS DAY' and 'DOWN PEOPLES DAY'; 'HUDSON COUNTY NEWS ROUNDUP' with 'VOTER REGISTRATION DEADLINE NEARS, LOCAL BUSES GETTING REVAMP AND MORE'; 'UNORTH @ JERSEY CREATORS MARKET FIT FESTIVAL'; 'HERMANITAS DESIGN USES ART TO HIGHLIGHT LATIN HERITAGE AND MENTAL HEALTH'; 'SANGUINE @ JERSEY CREATORS MARKET FIT FESTIVAL'; 'What's Happening?' roundup for October; 'WRITERS OF TOMORROW: AURELIA LUCIANO'S PATH AS A POET'; 'SOL CREW @ THE STREETWEAR EXPO'; and 'WEST NEW YORK RESIDENTS NOT BACKING DOWN IN FIGHT AGAINST PARKING SHORTAGES AND CENTRIFICATION'. At the bottom, there is a 'Related accounts' section with six suggested accounts: 'jerseycitytimes', 'next_door_pro...', 'thenewsq', 'unleashedthrift...', 'everythingjerse...', and 'latinosof'.

Source: Slice of Culture

RIDGE VIEW ECHO

Grantee Spotlight

February 6, 2025

By Dickson L. Louie
& Marisa Porto



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“Local News by Local Folks”
–Ridge View Echo Tagline

Overview of Ridge View Echo and news coverage area

Over the past several years, long after the hometown *Blairstown Press* newspaper ceased publication nearly 30 years ago in Warren County, local residents began to rely on Facebook pages to share their local news. Now, the rural county, located in the northwest corner of New Jersey and across the Delaware River from Pennsylvania, has Ridge View Echo (RVE) (ridgeviewecho.com and **Exhibit RVE-1**), a digital publication that serves the townships of Blairstown, Frelinghuysen, Hardwick and Knowlton. As one of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium’s (NJCIC) 14 original grantees in May 2021, RVE offers a menu of original stories about the local townships and school board meetings, community events, community profiles, high school sports, and obituaries.

RVE is updated with local news stories on a rolling basis and has been a recipient of an NJCIC grant for the past four years starting in 2021. Warren County, with a 2024 U.S. Census Bureau population estimate of almost 111,000, is approximately 75% White, 14% Hispanic or Latino, 8% Black, and 3% Asian.¹ The total population of the four townships covered by RVE is almost 13,000, making up approximately 12% of Warren County.

“This part of New Jersey is very rural, and does not have a lot of—or any, really—dedicated local news outlets,” said Stefanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. “Traditionally, this part of the state has been covered by larger publications or stations and their subsidiaries not based in any of these cities. There have been journalists based in these areas that reported for small weeklies and other similar-sized news outlets in the past, but not recently. Some parts of New Jersey in this region have also been covered by news organizations out of Pennsylvania.”²

Getting started and rebirth of original local community content

The idea for RVE took off after John Celock, an NJCIC board member, responded to an email inquiry about local news grants from the members of the Blairstown Enhancement Committee (BEC) in late 2020. Celock told the BEC about the Consortium and encouraged the group to apply for a grant. At the time, the BEC was a local civic group of interested citizens that had been formed ten years earlier to support and promote local community activities.

“Because of my background in journalism, I raised my hand and said, ‘I’ll take on that project (of applying for the NJCIC grant),’”³ said Paul Avery, the RVE original

¹ United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, Warren County New Jersey population estimate, July 1, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/warrencountynewjersey/PST045224>

² Murray email to author June 26, 2024.

³ Avery interview with author, April 18, 2024.

executive editor [now retired], and a former board member. Avery was a member of the Blairstown township committee and had been the managing editor of *Blairstown Press* prior to its demise.

In its initial 2021 grant application for RVE—originally called “The Blairstown Greater News Project”—the leaders wrote that their “primary goal is to provide our community with news about local government and school board actions and important news that can affect the local community. We do this by providing honest, unbiased and nonpartisan news. We strive to inform our community members so they can become better community citizens. In addition to our primary goal, we cover community events and interesting people in our community, and provide resource guides.” The name Ridge View Echo was chosen to symbolize that the news outlet would provide feedback like an echo against the mountain range that overlooks the community it serves.

“Even though we applied, we were surprised to have been selected for the grant,” said Gail Keogh-Dwyer, one of the original RVE co-founders and a former board member and treasurer [also now retired], believing that applicants from more urban and more diverse communities would be selected before them.⁴

With no established news outlets prior to the funding, local township and school board meetings in the Blairstown area were not being covered much. Local communities often learned about township or school board decisions after the fact on social media. “With RVE, the community could learn about the key local decisions that were about to be made and have a voice in shaping them,” said Avery⁵.

The initial NJCIC grant of \$35,000 in May 2021 enabled RVE to launch less than a year later, in February 2022. It had an initial publication schedule of every two weeks, before posting a new local news story each day to get users into the habit of visiting the site regularly. The funding allowed for payment of editors and writers, a general manager, website management, email services, advertising support services, legal fees, and supplies. Since 2021, RVE has received three more NJCIC grants: \$40,000 in 2022; \$100,000, 2023; and \$120,000, 2024.

RVE writers cover each township and school board meeting in person and all of its stories are then reviewed by an editor to ensure that they are fair, accurate and unbiased. A newsletter (see **Exhibit RVE-2**) highlighting stories is emailed to subscribers every Wednesday. A newsletter of weekend events (see **Exhibit RVE-3**) is also emailed each Friday. RVE is overseen by a board of five volunteer directors, who meet regularly over Zoom once a month. Its staff includes a managing editor, Kyra Dosch-Klemer, who manages a team of freelance writers and a general manager, Susan Wilinski, who oversees daily operations, acts as a liaison between the board and the publication team, between the board and NJCIC, and between the board and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. Susan also administers community events and public relations.

⁴ Keogh-Dwyer interview with author, April 5, 2024.

⁵ Avery interview with author, April 18, 2024.

“Some of the major local stories that we’ve helped highlight included [public funding of the Blairstown pedestrian bridge](#), [the public debate on the building of an Amazon warehouse](#), and the [board meetings of several school districts](#),” said Avery.⁶ Without RVE, public hearings of these events might have gone unnoticed by the local community.

In a March 2023 needs assessment conducted by Sarah Stonbely for the Center for Cooperative Media, “out of 154 respondents, 56% were ‘somewhat familiar’” with RVE, “32% were ‘very familiar,’” and “12% were ‘not at all familiar.’”⁷ Stonbely noted that the relatively high level of familiarity by respondents is likely because the survey was circulated by people “close to the outlet, but [it] also shows that they are capable of reaching people outside their immediate orbit and that there is room for growth.”⁸ Among the respondents, there was strong interest in the traditional “hard news; topics of crime, local politics and health care”, as well for small-town topics, such as celebrations of history, profiles of local individuals (see **Exhibit RVE-4**), and of things to do and enjoy, such as raising a family, outdoor recreation, and entertainment.⁹

Through content partnerships with the local businesses, RVE was able to expand its local news coverage. RVE has an agreement with Newbaker Funeral Home that allows for posting of all obituaries that are printed on the funeral home’s website.¹⁰ RVE also has a partnership with the local private school, Blair Academy, allowing the news outlet to post articles pertaining to the Academy’s Society of Skeptics, visiting artists and guests that appear on the school’s website.¹¹ Its most recent partnership, a “News From the Past” column, was created in September 2024 with Blairstown Historic Preservation Committee. The site also launched its first local investigative report in 2024 about a [discrimination lawsuit against a local high school](#) that was picked up by *The (Bergen) Record* nearly two weeks later.

Jennifer Correa-Kruegel, Park Naturalist at the Warren County Department of Land Preservation, has been a columnist for RVE since October 2023. Correa-Kruegel saw RVE as a valuable and reliable platform for education: “I look at writing articles as a way of educating people about our environment and, therefore, as a part of my position in Warren County as a Park Naturalist. I feel like Ridge View Echo has [a] reputation for providing quality content to the local community and I have been honored to be a part of it in this capacity.”¹²

⁶ Avery interview with author, April 18, 2024.

⁷ Sarah Stonbely, "Information Needs Assessments of Three New Jersey Communities," Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, March 2023, page 33.

⁸ Sarah Stonbely, "Information Needs Assessments of Three New Jersey Communities," Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, March 2023, page 33.

⁹ Sarah Stonbely, "Information Needs Assessments of Three New Jersey Communities," Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, March 2023, page 33.

¹⁰ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹¹ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹² Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

“It is not surprising that RVE is filling a void,” observed Hanna Siemaszko, a research analyst at the Center for Cooperative Media who monitors RVE’s local news impact.¹³

According to Google Analytics, RVE’s total unique users have grown from 17,589¹⁴ in its first year; to 75,682,¹⁵ second year; to 80,270,¹⁶ current and third year.

From February 2022 to December 2024, the organization published nearly 1,900 posts, which include all original content, obituaries and press releases. “The positive feedback it regularly receives from readers is an indication that relationships are being forged between community members and the outlet,” Siemaszko said.¹⁷

“Ridge View Echo is terrific,” Andy Clurfeld wrote in a letter to RVE. “I’ve been a journalist in New Jersey since January 1, 1977, and I used to live/work in Hunterdon/Warren/Sussex counties for the first 10 years of my reporting life. (Miss the region muchly, but return constantly.) What you are doing with The Echo is wanted and necessary. I’m very glad to have come across it. With sincere thanks and appreciation for the hard work, commitment and dedication you all are clearly putting into this publication.”¹⁸

RVE has received similar praise from local officials, including a message from Pete Peterson, the Frelinghuysen fire chief, who said that “Ridge View Echo fills a wonderful void! Thank you.”¹⁹

“Also indicative of RVE’s reputation as a beacon for quality content is the traffic it garners, which also is a form of quantitative impact,” Siemaszko added. “Some of its top-performing articles get anywhere between 750 to 1,500 pageviews. One obituary, a tragic story about the loss of a 13-year-old boy from Blairstown, reached more than 1,900 people.”²⁰

What’s next?

Achieving financial sustainability is RVE’s long-term goal. In 2024, RVE was selected by NJCIC as one of its 11 grantees to be part of the Blue Engine Collaborative technology and accelerator program. In addition, as a member of the Local Independent Online News (LION) association, RVE participated in a LION sustainability audit in Summer 2024.

¹³ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹⁴ Google Analytics, from February 16, 2022, to February 15, 2023, provided by Ridge View Echo.

¹⁵ Google Analytics, from February 16, 2023, to February 15, 2024, provided by Ridge View Echo.

¹⁶ Google Analytics, from February 16, 2024, to December 31, 2024, provided by Ridge View Echo.

¹⁷ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

¹⁸ Reader note to Ridge View Echo

¹⁹ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

²⁰ Hanna Simaeszko, Ridge View Echo Impact Report, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University, July 2023.

“We were awarded a grant from LION to work on those areas that need some improvement over the next year or so,” said Wilinski. “We’re in the process of putting policies into place, expanding our fundraising, and exploring donations, rather than just relying on grants and advertising, which is surprisingly a smaller piece of the pie than either Kyra or I thought originally. And then, coming up with things like succession plans and our budget and working on all that. It’s been kind of eye opening.”²¹

Seeing RVE’s success, residents in other nearby townships have asked the start-up news outlet to expand its news coverage into their areas. “We do cover other towns...but in terms of [regular] meeting coverage, municipal coverage, and Board of Education, that’s four towns only at this point,” said Dosch-Klemer. “But once we have the reporters to branch out further than that, it will definitely be happening. I was hoping that would happen with one township this year, but it’s just been hard to get consistent coverage of those meetings. I really want the meetings covered. And before we say, ‘we’re covering your town, if there’s events happening,’ we [want to be able to commit to] covering a lot of those.”²²

²¹ Wilinski interview with author, December 13, 2024.

²² Dosch-Klemer interview with author, December 13, 2024.

Exhibit RVE-1 Ridge View Echo Home Page (September 10, 2024)

Advertise with Us | Write for Us | Submit an Event | Contact

Saturday, September 14, 2024

RIDGEVIEWECHO
Serving the Blairtown, Frelinghuysen, Hardwick and Knowlton Communities

f @ in Q
SIGN UP FOR FREE LOCAL NEWS

HOME ABOUT GOVERNMENT + POLITICS SCHOOLS SPORTS & RECREATION COMMUNITY EVENTS OBITUARIES RESOURCES

LATEST NEWS

A Lakeside Chat with Jennifer Correa-Kruegel

INTERESTING FOLK | Laura Ward, Contributing Writer - September 11, 2024

Know Better, Do Better It comes as no surprise that park naturalist, Jennifer Correa-Kruegel, chose a lakeside park picnic table for an interview. The White Lake Natural Resource Area is...

READ MORE

Pats Fall to Walkkill in Season Opener

SPORTS | Joe Phalon, Contributing Writer - September 11, 2024

Freshman C.J. Mamay passed for 62 yards in his first outing as a starting quarterback for the North Warren Patriots Saturday. While the Pats lost to Walkill Valley 23-8, Head...

READ MORE

HIGHLIGHTS

PHALON'S FILE
Getting a Handle on Clichés
SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

ECHO EATS
Lentil Stew
AUGUST 27, 2024

SCHOOLS
Knowlton Elementary Lines Up Classes and Aftercare for the New Year
AUGUST 27, 2024

BLAIRSTOWN
Dunkin' Developers Get Approval Extension
AUGUST 27, 2024

ECHO EATS
Focaccia Bread
SEPTEMBER 13, 2024

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23 Main Street, Blairtown, NJ 07825
(908) 707-1000 RadomandWetter.com

Source: Ridge View Echo

Exhibit RVE-2 Weekly Ridge View Echo newsletter (September 4, 2024)

[View in browser](#)



Wednesday, September 4, 2024

LAND USE MEETING

Frelinghuysen Committee Renews Support for Cannabis Farm

The Frelinghuysen cannabis controversy found its way back to town hall this week, where the township committee narrowly voted to renew its support for a proposed cannabis farm's license application to the state Cannabis Regulatory Commission.

A denial of the renewal at the Aug. 27 meeting could have effectively scuttled the application, which is currently before the township land use board, a result that would have pleased many of the approximately 100 people...

[Read more about this ongoing issue >>](#)

ENVIRONMENTAL + COUNTY NEWS

Warren County Certified as First New Jersey Community Wildlife Habitat by NWF

As of Aug. 5, 2024, Warren County is now the first county in New Jersey to be certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

At the annual reorganization meeting of the Warren County Board of County Commissioners in January, Commissioner Director James R. Kern III issued a challenge to county residents to help Warren become the first county in New Jersey to earn Community Wildlife Habitat certification...

[Read more about this project >>](#)

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PREVIEW

North Warren Regional

John Baum is returning as head coach to the ground he chewed as a tight end for the North Warren Patriots 18 seasons ago.

A 2007 North Warren graduate, Baum is taking the helm of the very young team, after serving as line coach for two years.

"I'm very excited to be leading the team this year," Baum said. "We have a very young team but I really do think we're going to be competitive."

With just handful of returning seniors...

Source: Ridge View Echo

Exhibit RVE-3 Ridge View Echo Weekend newsletter of local activities (September 6, 2024)

RIDGEVIEWECHO

THE WEEKEND

Fri. Sept. 6, 2024


Wow, summer already feels almost like a memory and there's even been the smell of wood burning stoves in the air at night. We'll keep you in the loop on all of the fun fall happenings in our area in the coming weeks, but most of them haven't gotten started yet. That doesn't mean there's any shortage of local things to do! We've got you covered. Scroll down to see what's going on this weekend.

We feature local weekend events in this email each Friday morning. If you know of a fun local event, be sure to submit it (it's 100% FREE - no strings attached!) on our website:

[Submit your event](#)

Looking for some local fun this weekend?

We've got you covered. From family fun to live music and shows, we bring you some highlights of the upcoming weekend.



Marksboro Mills Cookie Bake

Friday, September 6 at 11:00 am - 3:00 pm | Frelinghuysen
 Stop by Marksboro Mills on Friday, Sept. 6, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. to buy cookies and crackers freshly made from River Valley Community Grains' top-notch local, regenerative flours in the shiny new bakery.
[Details here >>](#)

Belvidere Victorian Day

Saturday, September 7 at 9:00 am - 5:00 pm | Belvidere
 This year's event will include a Car Show, Fashion Show, Tea Garden, Author's Grove, horse drawn carriage rides, kids area, food, historic walking tours & re-enactments, live music, exhibitors, and a variety of artisan vendors.
[Details here >>](#)

Seed Saving Workshop


Saturday, September 7 at 10:00 am - 12:30 pm | Blairstown
 Come to a seed saving workshop at CSG at Genesis Farm to collect and process seeds from kale, tomato, flowers, and garlic for the 2025 season. There will be plenty of time for discussion and questions with our incredible seed-saving expert, Judith von Handorf. Leave with the enthusiasm and confidence to practice seed saving on your own, plus samples of the seed we collect. No experience necessary!
[Details here >>](#)

Source: Ridge View Echo

Exhibit RVE-4 Interesting Folks

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Tuesday, September 10, 2024




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HOME ABOUT GOVERNMENT + POLITICS SCHOOLS SPORTS & RECREATION COMMUNITY EVENTS OBITUARIES RESOURCES

INTERESTING FOLKS




A Studio Visit With Local Artist, Rita Baragona
AUGUST 26, 2024



Rosemary DeTrollo – A Blairstown Resident with Angelic Connections
JULY 16, 2024


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MAY 21, 2024

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INTERESTING TEEN: Sophia Rocca of Frelinghuysen – Gymnast Advances to Nationals with North Stars
MAY 8, 2024



INTERESTING FOLKS: "The Walker" Challenged Himself to Stop Smoking by Taking Cig-Free Long Walks Everywhere – and It Worked!
MARCH 12, 2024

-Advertisement-




HELP SAVE DEMOCRACY

The Ridge View Echo is searching for a few more Board of Directors members.

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-Advertisement-



RW RADOM & WETTER
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Source: Ridge View Echo

ATLANTIC CITY FOCUS

Grantee Spotlight

February 6, 2025

By Dickson L. Louie
& Marisa Porto



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“If it’s important to you, it’s important to us.”
– Atlantic City Focus Tagline

Overview of the Atlantic City Focus

Launched in March 2022, Atlantic City Focus (see **Exhibit AFC-1** and atlanticcityfocus.com) has been a dream of its founder and publisher, Mark Tyler, for the past three decades, ever since he was an undergraduate journalism student at Columbia Union College (now known as Washington Adventist University) in the 1990s.

“We are an African American-owned media company,” said Tyler. “And, part of what we do is allow residents and natives to tell their own stories in their own way. We provide a safe space for people to do that. When we do it correctly, what we do will enlighten, inform, and entertain as we celebrate African American culture, history, and traditions.”¹

Tyler noted that the news outlet also helped the public engage with its community with a Civic Information Guide that it published. He added: “That’s a big part of what we were able to do because of the [New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC) grant in 2023], and we are extremely grateful for all that they have done to support our work in terms of civic engagement. It’s been absolutely amazing.”²

While the staff of Atlantic City Focus is small—including Tyler, an executive editor, an arts and entertainment editor, and several contributing writers³—its founder and publisher has big ideas for the news site. “My vision for Atlantic City Focus is to be the premier media source for the African American community in Atlantic City, and we’re going to rival the legacy paper,” he added. The background photo that Tyler uses on his LinkedIn page and on every Zoom call shows a black-and-white image that he envisions to be the future conference room of the Atlantic City Focus newsroom. It has a 10-seat board table and sports a banner that reads, “If it’s important to you, it’s important to us” (see **Exhibit AFC-2**). Tyler noted: “That’s what I’m aiming for us to become” about having a fully-staffed newsroom in the future. In addition to running the news outlet, Tyler works at two other jobs—as a district communication specialist for Atlantic City Public Schools and as the drum corps director for a local club.⁴

“The news market in Atlantic City and Atlantic County is really unique,” said Stephanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. “Atlantic City has a very diverse population and has gone through quite a lot of economic distress over the past few decades. It has had its own metro daily for a long time, *The Press of Atlantic City*. It is also covered by news organizations out of Philadelphia, including the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and television news stations. There is an NBC reporter who is based there. However, as the news industry has gone

¹ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

² Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

³ Atlantic City Focus, Meet Our Team, <https://www.atlanticcityfocus.com/staff/> accessed February 1, 2025

⁴ Mark Tyler, Founder, Atlantic City Focus, LLC, Linked-In page, accessed October 21, 2024

through economic distress, that has affected news coverage in Atlantic City. *The Press of Atlantic City* has gone through several ownership changes and contracted quite a bit. The Philly organizations don't cover the city nearly as much as they used to except when something bad happens. And there is not nearly enough media that reflects and speaks to the BIPOC communities there, especially those that don't speak English."⁵

Perhaps best known for its tourist attractions, such as the Boardwalk, Steel Pier, its beaches, and nearby casinos, Atlantic City has a population of approximately 38,500. According to the 2024 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Atlantic City is approximately 32% Black; 32% Hispanic or Latino; 16% White; 16% Asian; and 2% Native American. Nearly 11% are two races or more. About 30% of its population is foreign-born.⁶

From the *Around The Way Informer* newsletter to Atlantic City Focus

"Atlantic City Focus is 30 years in the making," said Tyler. "When I was a sophomore in college, I would have this recurring dream. What I would see in the background of my mind was, 'Atlantic City Focus, if it's important to you, it's important to us.' And I knew it was a community newspaper. I knew it was a Black newspaper. I knew that it was my job to bring it forth. But I didn't know how I could ever take on such a Herculean task."⁷

A media entrepreneur at an early age, Tyler first provided community news through a newsletter that he produced in a summer community journalism program as a college student in 1992. The newsletter, *Around the Way Informer*, was supported by the local housing development and covered his neighborhood and local community. "It was a great learning experience," recalled Tyler. "I learned how to manage people. I learned how to manage my small budget. I learned how to interact with neighborhood people. And I learned how to interact with the managers of the program because it all came under the Social Services Department."⁸

After graduating from college in 1994, Tyler took a position with his hometown newspaper, *The Press of Atlantic City*, where he worked as a staff writer and a weekend coordinator until 2004.

"I'm totally grateful for that experience," said Tyler. "Then, after 10 years, I decided I wanted to chase some other dreams. So I did some real estate development. I bought some homes, I rehabbed some homes. I was doing really well. And then 2008 hit the housing market, and everything took a bad downturn."⁹

⁵ Murray email to co-author, June 26, 2024.

⁶ United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, July 1, 2024 estimate, Atlantic City, New Jersey. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/atlanticcitcitynewjersey,US/PST045224>

⁷ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

⁸ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

⁹ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024

So Tyler returned to his journalism career. In 2011, he took a position with Patch, a hyper-local news network of 1,000 sites launched by AOL. There he helped launch several Patch news sites in Maryland, building a news-gathering system that could be run by one or two people. After Patch faced company-wide financial challenges in 2013, Tyler was one of 350 employees laid off, but came away from that experience with the knowledge of how to launch a hyper-local news site.

Tyler used that knowledge to create Atlantic City Focus. “I began to have that recurring dream again about Atlantic City Focus,” said Tyler “And I came upon a newspaper grant from The Tiny News Collective. I’m so very grateful to them, because they were the first people who saw my dream on paper, and they believed in me. Now, here’s what was really interesting. The grant application deadline was on January 9th, which was my 50th birthday. So I knew that I had to submit this grant application. It was the first grant application that I’d ever written. And it was approved. I got a The Tiny News Collective micro grant of \$2,500 and began the upstart newspaper, Atlantic City Focus.”¹⁰ The grant also allowed Tyler to network with other small publishers in learning best business practices.

The site provides coverage of community news, Black history and culture, and arts and entertainment in the Atlantic City area. “Atlantic City Focus makes a conscious effort to bring balance to our coverage because crime and political scandals [as primarily reported by other local publications] do not represent the community in its totality,” wrote Tyler in the 2023 Consortium grant report.¹¹ In addition to a website and social media presence on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), Atlantic City Focus also connects with the Black community through its weekly newsletter of weekend events (see **Exhibit AFC- 3**). Before launching the site, Tyler conducted an assessment of the community’s information needs.

“Those surveyed said, ‘We must have events,’” recalled Tyler. “‘We need a place where we can find out what’s going on, particularly on the weekend. And we want to know what’s going on. Because right now, we’re going everywhere. We’re going on Facebook. We’re going on Google’... ‘It would be amazing if someone could curate the things that are happening and going on in a single central location.’¹²” This newsletter is delivered virtually every Wednesday evening or Thursday morning, with a typical open rate of 50%¹³—more than double the average newsletter open rate of 20%.¹⁴

“If you’re in the community and you want to know what’s happening, it provides information about entertainment throughout our Tri-state area,” said Tracy Thompson, an avid Atlantic City Focus supporter, political consultant, and community activist who is also on the Alumni Board at Stockton University. “The Weekend Guide newsletter helps you stay active and informed, and it lets you know what’s going on

¹⁰ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

¹¹ Atlantic City Focus, 2023 Grant Report.

¹² Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

¹³ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

¹⁴ Bernard Meyer, "What is a good open rate for email: A detailed guide for 2024," Omnisend.com blog, September 18, 2024.

in your community so you can feel like you have a purpose. It's hard to get local information. But when you have local information, you're very grateful for that source and the Atlantic City Focus newsletter gives us an avenue to have a broad source of activities to choose from."¹⁵

"Since its inception, Atlantic City Focus has been the go-to resource for local news," said Tyra Causey, a local business owner, who also uses the Weekend Guide to plan ahead for social events and day trips because of her busy schedule.¹⁶

"The Weekend Guide, which now includes the DMV [Delaware, Maryland and Virginia] and Philly areas, highlights the latest events and perfect day trip destinations. With my busy schedule, planning ahead for social events can be challenging. However, knowing what's happening when I have a free moment is invaluable. Atlantic City Focus is a must-have resource for anyone in or visiting South Jersey, Philadelphia, NY, NJ, and the DMV region."¹⁷

The Consortium and the Atlantic City Focus Civic Information Guide

In 2023, Tyler decided to apply for an NJCIC grant to help Atlantic City Focus create a Civic Engagement Guide for residents (see **Exhibit AFC-4**) that would also generate advertising and sponsorship revenue.¹⁸ The guide included local election news, candidate profiles and campaign finance reports. It listed phone directories for City Hall, Atlantic County Offices, the Atlantic City Board of Education, Public Safety Departments, municipal officials, and New Jersey State representatives.

"Atlantic City has a vibrant community and rich history," wrote Tyler in his 2023 NJCIC grant application, "but many residents lack the information necessary to stay engaged in local elections, aren't fully aware of community resources, and don't know how to quickly contact leadership. This has led to low voter turnout and a lack of civic engagement. The Atlantic City Focus Civic Information Guide aims to address this problem by providing residents with a comprehensive directory that will help them stay informed and engaged in their community."¹⁹

"By providing this information in an accessible and easy-to-use format, our goal is to increase voter turnout, promote civic engagement, and empower residents to take an active role in shaping the future of Atlantic City,"²⁰ Tyler added.

Atlantic City Focus received an initial grant of \$100,000 from NJCIC in 2023, then a second grant of \$100,000 in 2024 to create another [Civic Engagement Guide](#) (see **Exhibit AFC-5**). Based on user feedback on the initial guide, the second focuses on the winners of the 2024 local election and includes a mobile app that provides the guide with online search capability and additional digital advertising revenue.

¹⁵ Reader note to Atlantic City Focus.

¹⁶ Reader note to Atlantic City Focus

¹⁷ Reader note to Atlantic City Focus

¹⁸ Atlantic City Focus, 2023 Grant Application.

¹⁹ Atlantic City Focus, 2023 Grant Application.

²⁰ Atlantic City Focus, 2023 Grant Application.

“Atlantic City Focus’ civic engagement throughout Atlantic City and Atlantic County is of utmost importance because it is the only media that really reaches deep into the grass roots,” said James Whitehead of the U.S. Humanitarian Aid Response Team Cares ([U.S.HART Cares](#)), a nonprofit organization that provides cyber security training for Atlantic City residents. “We are also thankful and appreciative for their annual Civic Engagement Guide and we depend on Atlantic City Focus to keep us aware of what’s going on.”²¹

In October 2024, Atlantic City Focus received \$100,000 in additional funding as one of the 205 recipients nationwide in Press Forward’s 2024 Open Call for local news grant applications, entitled “Closing Local Coverage Gaps.” Press Forward is a coalition of several major foundations—including MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Democracy Fund—that raised \$500 million to support local media nationwide over five years. Tyler hopes to use funds from the grant to help make Atlantic City Focus financially sustainable. A member of Local Independent Online News (LION) association, Tyler says he also plans to go through the association’s sustainability audit in 2025 to help identify additional ways to make Atlantic City Focus financially sustainable for the long run.²²

What’s next?

While Tyler seeks to make Atlantic City Focus the voice of the Black community, he is also aware that large news organizations that once played a pivotal community role are now struggling. “To see the newspaper business go to what it is today is a little disheartening,” said Tyler. “But I feel very honored and very privileged to now have Atlantic City Focus be a part of the news landscape. Are people going to consume news in the way that they used to? Absolutely not. But I want people who come to our news website to feel that it connects with them, that it’s a part of them, and that we are taking their wants and needs seriously. This is not a vanity project for Mark Tyler. I have enough things to do. Our desire and our commitment is to actually serve the community.”²³


²¹ Reader note to Atlantic City Focus.

²² Tyler interview with author, December 6, 2024.


²³ Tyler interview with author, March 27, 2024.

Exhibit ACF-1 Atlantic City Home Page (September 10, 2024)

** Donate Now to support the NEW voice and vision of Atlantic City **



www.HairLossCenterNJ.com Technology Solutions by Hair Loss Center



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT
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NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE

It's the First Weekend of September, Still Time for Fun

This weekend is packed from AC to DC. There are Jazz Events, a Movie Premiere, Diner en Blanc, Day Parties, Comedy Shows and Festivals. And Remember, Atlantic...



NEWS

The NAACP Atlantic City Branch Invites All to its September 9th Meeting for a Demonstration on Using the New Voting Machines

The Atlantic City Branch of the NAACP is inviting the community to their next meeting on Monday, September 9, 2024 at 6pm for a demonstration on how to use the new voting machines.

NEWS

Atlantic City's Labor Day Weekend Starts with a Third Ward Police BBQ


Labor Day Weekend marks the beginning of the end of summer in Atlantic City. The annual Third Ward Police BBQ is one of the last neighborhood summer outdoor...



NEWS

AC and Pleasantville Unveil Joint Municipal Court in Grand Opening Ceremony

The merger, facilitated by collaboration between Atlantic City, Pleasantville, Superior Court Vicinage 1, and the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA), has led...



Your Key to Winning the Weekend in Atlantic City

The Best on the Boardwalk and Beyond Every Week



Source: Atlantic City Focus

Exhibit ACF-2 Mark Tyler's vision of the Atlantic City Focus editors' conference room of the future



Source: Atlantic City Focus

Exhibit AFC-3 Atlantic City Focus Weekend Guide Newsletter (Friday, October 3, 2024)



It's the First Weekend of October, Have Some Fun

By Raymond Tyler - 2 Oct 2024

[View in browser](#)



THURSDAY October 3, 2024

We're trying something new with the Weekend Guide to hopefully make it easier to find events near you. To see events in your preferred community, hit the arrow in the top right corner to have the events show. We'd love to get your feedback on whether this is the right look and types of events you want. Let us know in the comments or email us.

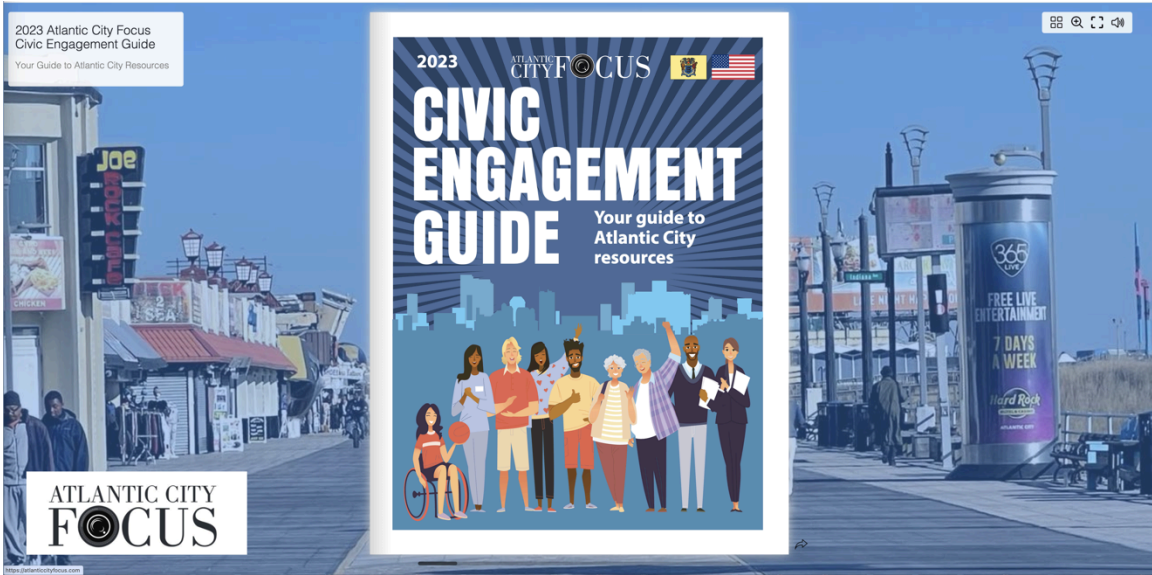


- NEW JERSEY**
- [Learn Something New at the Harborside Chat with New Jersey Audubon Nature Center of Cape May](#)
 - [Watch the Birdie in Cape May](#)
 - **Check Out These Cool Standing Events****
 - [It's Open Mic Night at Kelsey's in Atlantic City](#)
 - [Get Your Laugh On with Comedy at Resorts](#)
 - [See Atlantic City in Style! Rent a Party Bus](#)
 - [Relax on the Water on a Private Boat Charter](#)
 - [Explore Ladies Night at Kaycee Ray's Sports Bar & Pub in Vineland](#)
 - [Enjoy Stepping/Line Dancing Thursday at Wilson's](#)

Eddie Morgan and his band bring Jazz and popular music favorites to the...

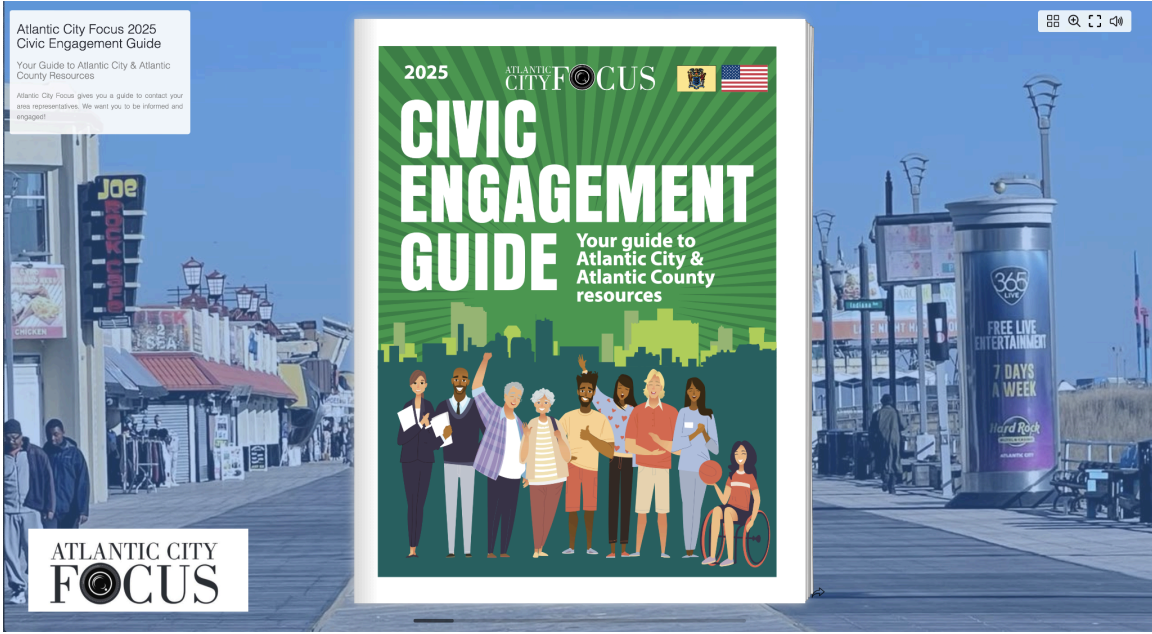
Source: Atlantic City Focus

Exhibit AFC-4 Atlantic City Focus 2023 Civic Engagement Guide



Source: Atlantic City Focus

Exhibit AFC-5 Atlantic City Focus 2025 Civic Engagement Guide



Source: Atlantic City Focus

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