



Local Media Association / Local Media Foundation

Empowering Midwestern Newsrooms with Advanced Fundraising Strategies

Playbook and Case Study

March-August 2026

*A program from the
LMA Lab for Journalism Funding and Medill Local News Initiative*

Contents

Contents	1
Introduction	2
Curriculum	3
Donor Management and Data Tracking Systems	4
Small Donor Campaigns	6
High Net Worth Donors	8
Planned Giving	9
Events	11
Donor Stewardship	12
Newsroom Outcomes	15
Capitol News Illinois	16
City Bureau	17
Injustice Watch	18
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	19
The Chicago Reporter	21
The Lansing Journal	22
The Record Community News Group	23
Windy City Times	24
Conclusions	26

Introduction

In the spring of 2026, nine local newsrooms set out on a journey to improve their fundraising strategies. These news organizations, which were already pursuing philanthropic support, wanted to dive deeper into methods to support their essential work. Over the next three months, they participated in the Medill-LMA Midwest Advanced Fundraising Lab, a partnership between the Local Media Association's Lab for Journalism Funding, and the Medill Local News Initiative, with additional support from Google News Initiative.

The news leaders learned about advanced strategies for pursuing philanthropic support — ranging from planned giving to fundraising events — and then put these lessons into practice through implementing a capstone project. Over the course of the program, the news organizations set goals and built data systems, developed event strategies, created donor stewardship models, scaled high-net-worth donor processes and more. Through peer sharing, personalized coaching and learning from industry experts, the news organizations left with measurable successes and strategies for sustainability to share with their peers and the industry at-large.

This program built on the learnings of the 2025 Illinois Cohort of the LMA Lab for Journalism Funding, which trained 12 news organizations across Illinois in



Kenya Joyce Hatch from The Chicago Reporter presents her capstone project on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

foundational best practices for pursuing philanthropic support for local news.

The news organizations' outcomes, outlined in this report, show the power of peer learning and collaborations, and highlight the potential for philanthropy to be one pillar for sustaining local news organizations in the Midwest and beyond.

Curriculum

The curriculum for the Medill-LMA Midwest Advanced Fundraising Lab was focused on peer knowledge exchange, giving news leaders the opportunity to share their expertise and learn from one another. In a pre-program survey, newsrooms identified the fundraising skills they sought to improve, and the curriculum was designed to meet their goals. In addition, each newsroom co-led a session, sharing their specific area of expertise and experiences with the group. Guest speakers added outside expertise to each session.

Through this format, newsrooms benefitted by learning directly from their peers, helping them support each other with wins and lessons. This process ultimately strengthened connections among these newsrooms in the Midwest ecosystem.



Lab for Journalism Funding coach Joanne Heyman presents to the cohort on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

"It's so encouraging to be in a cohort of people who are all supporting each other as we all try to figure out how to keep serving our communities with the local news they need. Everyone brings something to the table — ideas they tried, disappointments they overcame, templates to borrow and enthusiasm that is contagious. This is a great time to be in local news, and labs like this from Medill and LMA are one of the reasons!"

- Melanie Jongsma, The Lansing Journal

In the following pages, program leaders have outlined the top takeaways from each component of the program. Local news leaders everywhere can learn from these insights and implement these strategies in their own organizations to build philanthropic support for their work.

Donor Management Systems	Planned Giving
Small Donor Campaigns	Fundraising Events
High Net Worth Donors	Donor Stewardship

Donor Management and Data Tracking Systems

Newsrooms should set up clear, organized data systems to track their philanthropic efforts. They should record donor information, grant pipelines, stewardship steps and any other data related to their fundraising work.

What data should a newsroom track?

- Donor contact info and contact preferences
- Amount(s) given and date
- Recurring vs. one-time gift
- Thank-you note sent?
- Reason for giving
- Coverage area(s) of interest
- History of engagement (event attendance, subscriber, etc.)
- Relationship to organization/relationship holder
- History of touchpoints from development team
- Next steps

There are many systems that newsrooms can use, ranging from simple spreadsheets to elaborate CRMs. When selecting a tool, the best system is the one a team will actually use. Overengineering a complex system for a newsroom early in its philanthropic journey may create barriers for the staff to actually track data. For other teams, with large amounts of data to keep organized, a more advanced CRM may make sense.

Also, newsrooms should consider how the system works across departments. It's powerful to have a system that will integrate well with subscription and sales tools so teams can look for relationships and patterns in the information they collect. K. Ellen Stackhouse from Capitol News Illinois encouraged the cohort to think of their data tracking system as "a source of institutional knowledge," where information from across teams can be organized in one place, making it easier to combine knowledge and create meaningful reports.

No matter which tool a newsroom uses, it's important to track early and often so the data will be comprehensive and useful. The sooner a newsroom starts tracking information, the more data they will have to inform their decisions and donor systems in the future.

Another important consideration is to build a tracking method that isn't solely dependent upon a single person. Newsrooms that create a centralized donor tracking system ensure that their philanthropic success does not rely on one person's memory.

The news organizations in the Medill-LMA Midwest Advanced Fundraising Lab discussed the pros, cons and features of the systems they use. Here are some tools worth exploring:

- [Blackbaud Raisers Edge](#)
- [Bloomerang](#)
- [BlueLena CRM](#)
- [Bonterra EveryAction](#)
- [Custom Airtable CRM](#)
- [DonorBox](#)
- [Donor Perfect](#)
- [Givebutter](#)
- [Google Sheets/Excel](#)
- [Little Green Light](#)
- [Salesforce](#)

Small Donor Campaigns

Local news organizations seeking philanthropic support for their work should begin by looking for local support. Larger, regional and national funders want to see that organizations have earned local support from their communities. Successful small donor campaigns are a great signal to these funders that the community values the news organization's work. Small donations also become the starting point for stewarding higher levels of support.

When designing a small donor campaign, newsrooms should reach out to their audiences where they are. They can use email, direct mail, social media or other methods to reach them with their message. The right method will not be the same for every newsroom or for every segment of their audience, as it depends on the specific audiences' habits and needs.

Steps for small donor campaign messaging:

1. Name the **problem** the newsroom is trying to solve with its journalism.
2. Share **who the problem impacts** and why it matters.
3. Explain **how the newsroom will use journalism to address the problem**.
4. Highlight **what change donors can enable**.
5. Showcase the **positive impact** of journalism on the community.

Donors want to be part of something bigger than themselves. Pairing a powerful story of change with a clear call to action is a strong recipe for building local support.

In the call to action, news leaders should offer specific suggestions for the amount of money donors can donate, and make the connection between each level of support and the specific reporting it enables. As part of this messaging, it's also recommended to encourage supporters to sign up as recurring rather than one-time donors.

Whether the messaging is via email, direct mail, social media or somewhere else, newsrooms should make donating as easy as possible: using colors, obvious buttons or QR codes taking donors directly to a donation page.

Kamil Brady from The Culture reminded the cohort that campaign outcomes include more than just dollars raised — it's also useful to measure other metrics like

number of recurring donors and new donors to get a full picture of the success of a campaign.

After the campaign, it's critical to thank the supporters. Claudia Laws, from The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com, said it's important to tell donors what their money helped accomplish, and always give them the opportunity to donate again. People want to support the news organization's work, so leaders should invite them into the story and celebrate their part in it!

Newsroom Spotlight

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel has eight reporting roles supported by grants and community donations. Their strategy to raise community funds for these roles included 12 personal columns from the editor over six months explaining the campaigns, as well as emails to subscribers, timed pushes, reporter taglines that explained how to donate and handwritten thank-you notes. From these efforts, especially the columns, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel saw a 30% increase in individual donors and even received some four- and five-figure donations from community members.

Newsroom Spotlight

In The Lansing Journal's 2025 year-end campaign, the team introduced direct mail for the first time. This led to more than 50 new donors, more than 15 recaptured donors and \$7,303 in total donations, making up more than half of the overall campaign's total revenue. Melanie Jongsma, the publisher, said direct mail helped her reach older donors that might be more receptive to physical mail, and it helped capture donors' attention during a crowded giving season.

High Net Worth Donors

Finding and stewarding high net worth donors should be a gradual, relational and intentional process, said Kenya Joyce Hatch from The Chicago Reporter. It's about building relationships with people who want to be a larger part of the organization's story.

Knowing one's audience is key for building a high net worth donor strategy. Each newsroom's definition of "high net worth donor" will be specific to their organization and what the typical level of giving is for their supporters. It could be \$500, \$5000 or higher!

To identify high net worth donors in a given market, Hatch from The Chicago Reporter suggested considering these three elements:

Capacity:	Affinity:	Access:
Financial ability to give	Level of interest and connection to the cause	Ability to connect with the donor

Hatch said the intersection of these three elements determines donor potential.

Some news organizations buy lists that show donor potential to find possible supporters in their region. This is one approach, and it can work for some news organizations. But in many cases, it can be more effective for newsrooms to prioritize their internal pipeline rather than buying external data. News leaders should consider who is already engaging with their content, subscribing to their newsletter, attending their events or speaking publicly about their organization's work. These individuals are aligned with the mission and want to support it.

To build these relationships, newsrooms should ask potential donors what stories need to be told in their community as a way to connect, understand their priorities and invite them in. They should aim to steward contributors from donors to partners — building not just a donor base, but a community of advocates who believe in the newsroom's mission.

News organizations can also invite high net worth donors into their work to steward them. This could mean offering donors exclusive access to private receptions, letting them host an event on the organization's behalf, inviting them to meet journalists, asking them to send out letters for year-end campaigns, encouraging them to invite friends to receptions or other ways of being involved. When donors feel connected to the actual work and the people behind it, then they feel more like a partner.

Internally, newsrooms should create a structure for stewarding and connecting with donors with clear steps and ownership. This can include having a weekly

meeting with the team to review the donor pipeline and to develop strategies that strengthen relationships with supporters.

Newsroom Spotlight

The Chicago Reporter uses events, like its Justice Photojournalism Showcase, to identify high net worth donor prospects. Events help them identify 60-70% of their strong prospects, and they follow up within 48 hours to engage these attendees.

Planned Giving

Planned giving is an often-overlooked strategy in newsroom fundraising, yet it may be one of the most powerful tools available to strengthen journalism for the long term.

Planned giving refers to charitable gifts made as part of a donor's estate plan, most often realized after their death. These gifts are sometimes called bequests, legacy gifts, deferred gifts, estate gifts, gift commitments, gift intentions or beneficiary designations.

A planned gift is often the single largest gift a person ever makes. Building these relationships can make a significant impact in the long-run.

Up to \$124 trillion of wealth will be transferred over the next 25 years through legacy gifts, according to financial research firm Cerulli Associates. Many of these gifts will be mission-driven based on donors' values, which can include supporting journalism and its impact on local communities.

Donor education is important for planned giving because many people do not know about this option. Newsrooms should look for people who already care about their mission, and consider inviting them to deepen their support.

Individuals who give to an organization regularly and over long periods of time are strong candidates for planned giving. Demographic factors like wealth, age and family makeup also play a role. But regardless of age, individuals who are loyal to a newsroom's work and mission could become planned donors at some point.

When discussing this type of gift with potential donors, a news leader's goal should be to learn more about someone's desired legacy. Especially with this type of philanthropy, it is important to lean in with authentic care and empathy.

If a person commits to giving a planned gift to an organization, the organization should celebrate these donors as they do their largest donors. Even if the gift has not yet been realized, the donor is offering the organization a meaningful commitment that should be honored. Additionally, stewarding planned gift donors makes it more likely they will maintain their plan to include that organization in their estate plans. Newsrooms should give them the gift of connecting to the work that their legacy will support.

Both nonprofits and for-profits with fiscal sponsors can set up planned giving programs to support their work.

To get started, newsrooms can consider these tips from FreeWill, a company that supports nonprofits with planned giving:

- Add a line to their newsletter, website or donation page that makes donors aware that planned giving is an option. E.g. "Did you know you can support [organization name] through your estate plan?"
- Update their donation page to mention legacy or planned gifts.
- Include planned giving in thank-you emails to current donors: E.g. "Another way to make a lasting impact..."
- Use social proof: If anyone has already made a legacy commitment, share their story (with permission).
- Frame it around the future of local journalism (and not their own mortality).



Lab for Journalism Funding coach Samantha Johnston speaks to the cohort on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Events

Events are a powerful way to strengthen and build authentic relationships that can turn into financial support. Although events do not always make immediate profit, “events create the space where relationships start or deepen,” said Annica Keeler from the Tampa Bay Times during her presentation to the cohort.

When designing a fundraising event, newsrooms should think about the purpose and intended outcome for the convening. What do they want people to do after the event? How do they want the event to change their attitudes or behavior? The goal of an event should not solely be to fill a room, but to inspire some kind of action.

Not all events serve the same purpose, Keeler said. Here are a few purposes an event could have:

- Raise awareness
- Inspire engagement
- Increase activation
- Drive investment

When designing an event, news leaders should consider how logistics like time of day and location can help them reach their goal. They might want to organize a breakfast event for local business leaders so they can attend before they start their workdays, but an evening gala for the end-of-year fundraiser.

Event planners should also consider the venue and the energy it creates for the event. Can the newsroom partner with local businesses to have a bigger impact?

During the event, the news organization’s fundraising leaders should take time to connect with attendees and learn about their interests. They should use the opportunity to start building relationships with people who care about their work. If the goal of the event is to raise money, they should also leverage the talents of the folks on their team who are good at making the ask.

Fundraising leaders should also think creatively about ways they can involve other members of their team during the event. Supporters often appreciate the chance to meet and hear firsthand from reporters covering the community. Newsrooms

should consider having the reporting team talk about the issues they cover, and leave the fundraising asks to others.

After the event, following up with attendees is what builds relationships and turns a gathering into a fundraising opportunity. Fundraising staff should follow up with guests quickly, personally and intentionally. They can lean into the guest's positive feelings after the event to invite them to a coffee meetup, a listening conversation or to share opportunities for them to support the news organization's work.

Newsroom Spotlight

Windy City Times' 40th Anniversary Event took place at a well-known gay bar and included food and a cash bar. The team featured a podcast host as the event's host, and also featured comments from staff and an inspiring speech from a former salesperson from the news organization. To raise additional funds, Windy City Times sold thumb drives containing digital copies of every print issue of their publications. This event, in addition to another event celebrating the anniversary, raised more than \$25,000 to support Windy City Times.

Newsroom Spotlight

The Record Community News Group partners with a local bar in their area to host an annual event called "Heat Check" to raise support for their newsroom. The event is based on the show, "Hot Ones," where guests are challenged to answer questions while eating spicy wings. From tickets alone, their 2026 event raised \$5,600, and they auctioned off ice cream and milk for extra funds.

Donor Stewardship

When stewarding donors, Tyra Bosnic from City Bureau says newsrooms should think about their donor funnel. Who is at each stage of the donor journey, and what would it take to get them to the next stage?

Newsrooms should be intentional about how they are allocating their time across these stages. If they are getting the majority of their funds from their top donors,

then most of their stewardship energy should go there. That said, it's still important to steward smaller donors. Sending a personalized thank-you note when someone gives a small amount can make them feel valued and inspire them to sustain or increase their support.

Here are some ways to steward donors:

- **Say thank you.** One of the top reasons donors stop giving is because they didn't feel appreciated. For any size of donation, thanking the supporter is the easiest way to steward them and build the relationship.
- **Ask donors for feedback and ideas.** Listening is foundational, whether a newsroom is trying to find and tell better stories, better serve their audiences or better engage their supporters.
- **Share the impact of donors' support.** Donors want to know that their support makes a difference. This is especially powerful when a newsroom takes note of what each donor cares about and shares that specific kind of impact with them.
- **Involve donors in the mission.** Newsrooms can give donors opportunities to see and learn about their work, like coffee meetups, events, newsroom tours, briefings, giving circles and other opportunities to help them feel engaged.

By building relationships, newsrooms can inspire their supporters to become ambassadors for their brand — not just supporting it themselves, but also bringing others into the cause. Newsrooms should keep track of these relationships and touchpoints and give donors opportunities to get more involved.

A gift is just the start of the donor journey; the real work is in building sustained relationships to support the mission.

Newsroom Spotlight

In 2020, one of Injustice Watch's supporters introduced a potential donor to the news organization development staff. The development team started off by inviting them to a small, ticketed salon-style event. Over the next several years, the staff connected with the donor through one-on-one meetings, invitations to gatherings, and involving the donor in the work they cared about at the

organization. The donor became an ambassador for the newsroom, hosting events on their behalf, providing matching funds for end of year giving, and repeatedly renewing gifts of up to \$50,000 to support Injustice Watch's mission.



Tyra Bosnic from City Bureau presents her capstone project to the cohort on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago.
Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Newsroom Outcomes

Organization	Outcome
Capitol News Illinois	Capitol News Illinois built a repeatable impact measurement and storytelling framework that captures information once and enables the organization to reuse it across donor stewardship, grant reporting, program improvement, audience engagement and organizational planning.
City Bureau	City Bureau implemented a donor survey as a step towards building an event strategy designed to move mission-loyal supporters toward recurring giving and advocacy.
Injustice Watch	Injustice Watch shifted from resource-intensive, one-off events to a more sustainable event structure, while laying the groundwork for a repeatable event series and planned giving program.
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel shifted from a reactive newsroom in a state of downsizing and reliance on project-driven grants, resulting in an unstable business model, to a proactive, community-connected fundraising model that is building the infrastructure and partnerships needed for increased audience support and long-term newsroom sustainability.
The Chicago Reporter	The Chicago Reporter invested in building a scalable individual and high-net-worth donor strategy designed to reduce the organization's dependence on institutional grants.
The Lansing Journal	The Lansing Journal demonstrated how trusted local journalism can serve as critical community infrastructure during a crisis, and converted its emergency response and coverage into significant support for its ongoing reporting.
The Record North Shore	The Record Community News Group transformed a broad geographic audience strategy into a more community-centered approach that helps readers and members identify with and support the communities they care about most.
Windy City Times	Windy City Times hired a part-time revenue director to invest in a strategic approach to sustainable fundraising.

Capitol News Illinois



K. Ellen Stackhouse from Capitol News Illinois presents her capstone project on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Problem to solve: Capitol News Illinois wanted to demonstrate the impact of donors' gifts to the newsroom's student partnership program, without recreating one-off impact reports or duplicating data collection and administrative work across teams.

What they did: Capitol News Illinois redesigned its workflows around a "capture once, reuse everywhere" approach, creating a shared system for collecting impact information about its partnership program with local universities. Their new system gathers student stories, outcomes, engagement activity and supporting assets that can strengthen both storytelling and development.

Qualitative wins: The new system reduces administrative work, makes the process of gathering feedback more efficient, provides metrics to track students' measurable outcomes and helps make information more immediately available for stewardship communications. It also standardized the ways the organization collects information across programs so they can better explain regional impact to donors in specific geographic areas.

Quantitative wins: Capitol News Illinois established a repeatable onboarding process designed to collect 100% of student information in one place, added pre/post skills assessments to measure student growth and created tracking systems that can aggregate engagement and outcomes over time. The team uses the impact information gathered in this process in visits with potential donors, and it successfully helped the team secure a \$10,000 grant to support a new student reporting project for a full year.

Looking to the future: Capitol News Illinois will focus on embedding these systems across the organization, using aggregate impact data to demonstrate outcomes to donors and funders while building a growing library of stories, metrics and engagement data that can support stewardship and decision-making over time.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Identify programs that need better impact tracking.** Newsrooms can make a list of the programs or projects they want to be able to explain better to their audience, funders and partners.
2. **Think about who will use the system.** Who will be entering information into the new tracking system? Newsroom staff? Subscribers? Event attendees?
3. **Decide which metrics to track.** Newsrooms should consider both qualitative and quantitative data they want to collect to show impact to their partners, donors and more. It can also be helpful for newsrooms to select a metric they can track across different kinds of projects, like geographic area of impact, so they can personalize impact reporting to different groups of donors.
4. **Build a form and a repository.** Newsrooms can use Airtable, Google Forms or other tools to create a form for impact tracking, then organize an archive to store the results so they are immediately available for stewardship communications and accessible to their whole team.

City Bureau

Problem to solve: City Bureau wanted to create more meaningful ways to engage donors beyond program-related events and convert mission-aligned supporters to deeper financial loyalty and advocacy.

What they did: City Bureau surveyed donors to gain a better understanding of programming interests and to steward them by asking for their insights to help shape their event strategy.

Qualitative wins: Survey responses confirmed strong enthusiasm for civic-focused programming, intimate in-person experiences and opportunities to build community with other mission-aligned people.

Quantitative wins: The strategy identified a near-term opportunity to convert seven non-active donors into monthly donors and increase giving among four recurring donors, contributing toward the broader goal of converting 100 donors

into the loyalty and advocacy stages of their donor funnel. City Bureau also launched a week-long fundraising campaign for one of its local programs, leaning on the strong enthusiasm for civic-minded work and the staff who make it possible. In one week, the team surpassed its \$5,000 goal and received donations from 18 new donors. More than 30% of the donations received were \$100 or more.

Looking to the future: City Bureau has several donor engagement events planned for the rest of the year. The team will continue building an event strategy that turns survey insights into action through personalized invitations, low-lift mission-aligned events and opportunities that reinforce donors' roles in making the work possible.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Assess the donor funnel.** Newsrooms can find the gaps and opportunities for the segments of their donor base they want to engage.
2. **Survey donors.** Newsrooms can ask why donors support the news organization and what kinds of opportunities they want to be more involved in the work.
3. **Review results.** Survey responses show what kind of programming donors want, what touchpoints they need from the newsroom's team and where they want to engage more.
4. **Design a strategy.** Newsrooms can start with a low-lift event or touchpoint that takes donor insights into account, then continue collecting community input through gatherings and other touchpoints to keep shaping their approach.

Injustice Watch

Problem to solve: Injustice Watch wanted to grow individual donor relationships for pipeline development, and build a lower-cost, repeatable event strategy to engage and activate donors instead of time-intensive, one-off events.

What they did: Injustice Watch hosted their first lower-cost, repeatable event with the goal of engaging and activating donors. They planned a "Summer Social" event

at a local distillery, focused on the distribution of fall judicial voter guides and with opportunities for networking and conversation.

Qualitative wins: The event sparked deeper donor relationships, surfaced the organization's first known planned-giving commitment and created new conversations and opportunities for board and donor engagement.

Quantitative wins: The event raised \$6,600 (\$3,000 net), brought together 80 attendees, added 32 new donors and generated a growing pipeline of prospective donors and future event opportunities.

Looking to the future: Injustice Watch will build on this momentum by continuing the “Summer Social” as an annual event and piloting sponsorship and more fundraising opportunities for it. They are also planning to host more creative events (like a s'mores event and a “paint and sip” event). In addition, the team will continue developing the systems, materials and prospect pipeline needed to grow planned giving over time.



Danny Callison from Injustice Watch presents his capstone project on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago.
Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Partner with a local business.** Newsrooms can host an event at a local venue that brings the right energy for the event's goals.
2. **Design for connection.** Light programming and activity stations can give attendees structure, while still making the event a light lift for the planning team. Newsrooms can include time for networking and conversation between attendees and the news organization staff.
3. **Pay attention.** Fundraising leaders should listen to donors as they share ideas, feedback or interest in other ways they want to support the newsroom's work (like planned giving)!

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



Greg Borowski from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel presents his capstone presentation on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Problem to solve: The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel needed to move beyond project-based grants to create a dedicated revenue strategy capable of generating sustained support for dedicated staff positions and rebuilding community connections. Also, organize a splintered collection of spreadsheets, notes and calendar reminders into a clean system to make progress on fundraising tasks.

What they did: The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel created a new development/partnerships role, betting that repurposing one reporting role for this purpose would lead to support for many more roles. They also built a calendar-driven system for grant deadlines and opportunities and an Excel-driven spend-down tracker and donor tracker.

Qualitative wins: The team developed more intentional strategies and systems for donor and event systems, newsroom buy-in and storytelling around the organization's impact, and began diversifying revenue through events and partnerships to secure a more sustainable future for the newsroom.

Quantitative wins: Since summer/fall 2025, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel secured enough grant revenue to support eight reporting roles via multi-year foundation partnerships, launched a community crowdfunding campaign to engage previous Report for America supporters and new supporters through Local Media Foundation, identified a donor list of 518 contacts who gave at least once, expanded to 17 grant-and -foundation supported internships and initiated a partnership with a Milwaukee-based fiscal sponsor to launch a planned giving program.

Looking to the future: The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel will continue producing community-connected journalism, powered by increased grant and audience support and diversified revenue through events and partnerships.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Listen (and keep listening).** Funders and community members are more likely to support a newsroom's work when it directly responds to community needs. Newsrooms should ask their community members what they care about, and create responses to those challenges.
2. **Implement and update tracking systems.** Having the data organized makes everything that follows easier. Newsrooms should build systems that the whole team can use.
3. **Create buy-in across the newsroom.** Fundraising leaders should make the case for support internally as well as externally. This could include giving fundraising presentations to the newsroom staff to ensure everyone understands the philanthropic goals.

The Chicago Reporter

Problem to solve: As editorial and audience growth outpaced fundraising infrastructure, The Chicago Reporter wanted to reduce dependence on restricted foundation and project-based funding that limited flexibility and long-term sustainability.

What they did: The Chicago Reporter built a six-month strategic roadmap for a sustainable giving pipeline, including wealth screening, leveraging board connections for referrals, targeted outreach, gift solicitation, stewardship and evaluation, with clear goals at each step.

Qualitative wins: The Chicago Report built systems for the full donor lifecycle, started identifying high net worth donor prospects, strengthened board and stakeholder engagement and began building personalized cultivation and stewardship practices around mission-aligned donors.

Quantitative wins: The team launched an advisory board and is working towards its target of 25 qualified prospects, 10 priority prospects and five board/stakeholder introductions.

Looking to the future: TCR will focus on turning this initial pipeline into a sustainable fundraising engine through major-gift cultivation, donor acquisition and systematic relationship-building that diversifies revenue over the long term. The team aims to acquire 25 new donors, \$30,000 in revenue and three major gifts of more than \$5,000.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Set SMART goals.** Newsrooms should assess their revenue mix and set measurable goals for their high net worth donor revenue stream.
2. **Create an advisory board.** Having an advisory board can give a newsroom feedback on their work, direction on how to engage their audiences and a group of ambassadors who are highly invested in their work.
3. **Activate board members.** Newsrooms should consider their board members' networks and invite board members to make introductions to individuals who are aligned with the organization's mission.
4. **Track and organize data for personalized outreach.** Newsrooms should keep track of contact information, who knows each prospect, recent touchpoints, areas of interest and other information to build relationships.

The Lansing Journal

Problem to solve: The Lansing Journal's community was hit by a series of tornadoes, creating urgent information and resource needs. In the aftermath, The Lansing Journal needed to translate its trusted relationship with the community into meaningful, real-time support.

What they did: The Lansing Journal became a trusted connector during the tornado response, sharing critical resources, providing updates, matching community needs with people willing to help, recruiting volunteers and reinforcing a sense of connection and collective resilience.

Qualitative wins: The Lansing Journal's efforts connected neighbors, helped those in need of food and resources, and inspired tornado victims to serve their neighbors even as they faced the aftermath of the disaster themselves. The Lansing

Journal also shared vital information about resources and recovery efforts on their website and social media to connect residents with support and timely updates.

Quantitative wins: Following the first tornado, the newsroom helped coordinate 10–20 volunteers each day to deliver donated meals, while local businesses provided food and hundreds of residents contributed gift cards and checks to support tornado-affected neighbors. The Lansing Journal published a video showcasing their efforts and the community’s strength, with an opportunity to support the organization. In the month after the first tornado, The Lansing Journal received more than \$7,000 in one-time donations, more than four times the amount raised in the previous month.



Melanie Jongsma from The Lansing Journal speaks to the cohort on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Looking to the future: The Lansing Journal will build on this experience by continuing to strengthen its role as essential community infrastructure, using the trust, relationships and connections built through local journalism to help Lansing respond to future challenges and support one another. The team will continue to highlight impact like this when pursuing philanthropic support for their work, showcasing their value as a community resource. They will also continue to be intentional about being visible in the community, serving their audiences in ways that only a local news outlet can do.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Pay attention to community needs.** Community listening can help newsrooms uncover true community needs that their journalism can help address.
2. **Consider how the news organization can help.** How can journalism's power of storytelling, convening and distribution help address the community's needs?
3. **Find partners.** Newsrooms should join forces with other local

organizations who are trying to address the same challenges.

4. **Show up.** When disaster strikes, newsrooms can use their resources and skills to help neighbors find information and resources. Local newsrooms are part of their communities, and audiences value when they show up and meet their needs.

The Record Community News Group

Problem to solve: The Record Community News Group wanted to deepen connections between its readers, members and the specific communities they care about while building a sustainable reader-supported revenue model.

What they did: The Record Community News Group added a question to their donation page to survey donors' geographic areas of interest and explored website traffic to gauge which communities have the most engaged readers.

Qualitative wins: The team strengthened its understanding of audience geography, introduced a more community-focused donor experience and identified partnerships, patience and sustainability as key drivers of long-term impact.

Quantitative wins: The audience and donor data on geographic areas gave The Record Community News Group a clearer strategic view of expansion opportunities and growth challenges, unlocking the organization's ability to better serve its audiences with community-specific operations. During the capstone period from May through August 2026, direct traffic to The Record's website grew by 23.62%, suggesting stronger brand recognition or returning readers, and increasing opportunities for relationships with new potential supporters. The Record, which also participated in the Lab for Journalism Funding in 2025, raised more than \$180,000 in grants that year — more than three times its total for the year prior.

Looking to the future: The organization will focus on delivering impactful, community-specific coverage, deepening strategic partnerships and building sustainable reader-supported revenue at a pace that prioritizes long-term viability over growth.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Evaluate data tools.** Newsrooms can identify where they already have data that shows what their audiences need, such as Google Analytics and donor data systems.
2. **Ask for data that's missing.** The Record Community News Group added a question to their donor page so they could better understand what geographic areas their donors care about. Newsrooms should think about what they wish they could ask donors and put that question somewhere donors will see it.
3. **Analyze the results.** Newsrooms should organize their data and look for trends to understand audience information needs. Then, they can use this data when their organization is making important decisions about coverage, expansion and partnerships.
4. **Find aligned partners.** If the newsroom doesn't have the capacity to meet all of its audience needs right away, it should find other partners doing the work and join forces. The Record Community News Group embraces partnerships with City Bureau, Evanston Roundtable and others to reach communities they might not otherwise be able to serve.

Windy City Times

Problem to solve: Windy City Times wanted to address limited staff capacity, declining grant funds and increasing market competition while finding a way to fund the dedicated revenue leadership it needs to grow.

What they did: While working on building funder relationships, Windy City Times decided to invest in its future by hiring a part-time revenue director to support their short- and long-term fundraising efforts, specifically related to large donors.

Qualitative wins: The organization clarified its fundraising priority, engaged directly with a large



Matthew Simonette from Windy City Times presents his capstone project on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

national funder and took a proactive step toward building sustainable revenue capacity rather than waiting on external funding cycles. Windy City Times successfully hired a part-time revenue director in August, creating dedicated capacity to raise the funds needed to sustain and eventually expand the role.

Looking to the future: Windy City Times will focus on empowering its new revenue director to build a diversified fundraising pipeline and generate the sustainable revenue needed to strengthen the organization's long-term financial position.

Steps newsrooms can take:

1. **Assess fundraising strategy and capacity.** Newsrooms should consider whether short-term capacity constraints are causing them to miss opportunities that could bring long-term support.
2. **Research and pursue funding opportunities.** Newsrooms should seek funders that align with their mission, and take time building those relationships. Philanthropy is a marathon, not a sprint.
3. **Invest in fundraising staff when the timing is right.** Newsrooms that are ready to take the leap can consider hiring a staff member dedicated to helping them reach their revenue goals.



Ryan Osborn from The Record Community News Group presents his capstone project to the cohort on Aug. 17, 2026 in Chicago. Credit: Hannah Carroll/@hannahinchicagophoto

Conclusions

The Medill-LMA Midwest Advanced Fundraising Lab gave news organizations strategies to deepen and bolster fundraising efforts in their news organizations. They built new data systems, cultivated donors, embarked on planned giving efforts, refined event strategies, and developed donor stewardship plans fit for their markets.

Based on a post-program survey, 100% of news leaders who completed the program said they expect that their participation in the program will improve their organization's fundraising efforts “A lot” in the next 6-12 months. And 70% of respondents said the program has already helped their news organization with fundraising efforts or wins.

“The Medill-LMA Midwest Advanced Fundraising Lab helped us approach fundraising with greater clarity and intention. My biggest takeaway was the importance of connecting our journalism’s impact to a compelling case for support, then pairing that story with consistent donor engagement and follow-up. The experience helped us think beyond individual appeals toward building lasting relationships with people who believe in our work and its value to the community.”

– Kenya Joyce Hatch, The Chicago Reporter

“(Planned giving) was the (strategy) where we see the most opportunity for growth, and I think that all the speakers and the materials that you all put together were very, very helpful and are going to be very helpful for us moving forward with that.”

– Danny Callison, Injustice Watch

“Coming out of 2025, we had grown revenue by 67% across five revenue streams, and it was humbling to see the communities we serve respond to our local journalism. We knew we had momentum, but we still had a lot to learn about sustaining it. The lab helped us build a clearer fundraising plan, put our donor data to better use and make the case for more capacity. Learning alongside other local newsrooms was just as valuable as the tools we took home.”

– Ryan Osborn, The Record North Shore

This program was a collaboration between the Local Media Association's Lab for Journalism Funding and the Medill Local News Initiative.

This report was co-authored by Nina Joss from LMA and Hannah Carroll from the Medill Local News Initiative, and edited by Frank Mungeam from LMA and Mackenzie Warren from the Medill Local News Initiative.

The **LMA Lab for Journalism Funding** teaches local newsrooms strategies and best practices for sustaining their journalism in part through philanthropy. Since 2020, the program has enabled more than 200 newsrooms to raise more than \$44 million to support essential local reporting. The LMA Lab for Journalism Funding is made possible with support from Google News Initiative and Knight Foundation.

The **Medill Local News Initiative** is led by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. Medill, a leader in education since 1921, is conducting groundbreaking research and training a new generation of multimedia journalists and marketing professionals to thrive in an increasingly challenging atmosphere.