



# COVID-19 RESPONSE

DECEMBER 2020

## ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center was founded in 2012 in response to the downsizing of New Jersey news organizations and the changes in the ownership of regional public media. These shifts in the news and information landscape hurt the volume of local news available in a state that has historically had limited news coverage, due to its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia.

The Center coordinates statewide and regional reporting, connecting more than 280 local news and information providers through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons. The Commons helps partners to share content and encourages them to collaborate and to support one another.

The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices, focusing on local journalism, business models, and ecosystem mapping. The Center convenes national programs, including an annual national summit for journalism organizations to foster the conditions, ideas, and practices that lead to stronger collaborative journalism across the U.S. The Center's annual reports offer a detailed history of programs and impact.

The Center is a grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. The Center receives core support from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Abrams Foundation, as well as project support from many other grantmaking sources and sponsors.

## INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020 deeply affected all aspects of daily life for millions of people around the world and disrupted economies in nearly every country.

The situation became dire in several hot spots, including the United States. As the virus and COVID-19, the disease it causes, spread rapidly in February and March, states began to lock down.

New Jersey instituted statewide lockdowns in March. Businesses and schools closed and much of everyday life went virtual as residents were asked to stay at home.

By mid-May 2020, more than 160,000 people in New Jersey had tested positive for COVID-19 and the death toll rose to nearly 12,000. New Jersey processed a record 1.1 million unemployment claims, totaling \$4.3 billion in payments. By mid-November, nearly 270,000 people had tested positive and nearly 17,000 people had died.

Journalists are first responders in a crisis, and especially in this global pandemic, information was critical to save lives. As the number of COVID-19 cases spiked, people needed access to basic information, including the virus's symptoms, how to get tested and where to get health care.

The lockdowns forced journalists to completely rethink how they did their work and how they were serving their communities. They had to figure out how to work in the middle of a stay-at-home order, a time when grocery shelves were running empty and personal protective equipment was hard to come by.

## THE CENTER'S APPROACH

The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University serves as a hub for news and information organizations in New Jersey. Through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons, the Center provides coaching, consulting, communication and networking to media professionals; it also runs collaborative journalism projects and seeks funding to support journalists.

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, the Center collected feedback from members of its NJ News Commons network about what they were facing and brainstormed solutions. That input, along with what the Center already knew from its previous work supporting news organizations in the state, helped mold a three-pronged initial approach to supporting NJ News Commons members in the midst of COVID-19; that first approach focused on information sharing, content sharing and funding.

Shortly thereafter, the Center added translation and collaboration coordination to how it was approaching the pandemic.

What resulted were several initiatives to support NJ News Commons members, including:

- An arrangement with NJ Spotlight to provide all of its COVID-19 statewide stories for republication by NJ News Commons members at no cost.
- A pop-up daily newsletter sharing NJ Spotlight content and other reporting resources.
- Arrangements to provide shared graphics and photos for republication.
- Daily communication of COVID-19 related journalism resources, including funding opportunities.
- Translation of COVID-19 content into Spanish, English and Korean.
- Creation of a fellowship to support ethnic media reporters covering COVID-19.
- Creation of a fellowship to support freelancers covering COVID-19 in their communities.
- Launching of the Loved and Lost project.
- Distribution of 20 \$250 gift cards to support equipment purchases for journalists.

## CONTENT SHARING

As New Jersey journalists grappled with multifaceted and continually evolving scientific information about the coronavirus, there was a clear need for resource and content sharing among news providers in the state.

Access to the daily COVID-19 briefings hosted by the governor's office and coronavirus case statistics was a shared need early in the pandemic among NJ News Commons members. Similarly, the Center knew that it would save resources to share statewide content as much as possible to avoid having local reporters doing essentially the same work in multiple places.

The Center approached NJ Spotlight, New Jersey's only statewide nonprofit newsroom, about sharing its COVID-19 stories with NJ News Commons partners. NJ Spotlight had been a generous and accommodating partner in the past, and this time was no different; the organization quickly agreed to make its content available for republication. Center staff worked with NJ Spotlight to craft a tagline for the stories and began sharing content with NJ News Commons members by creating a pop-up daily newsletter called "Covering COVID-19." It is sent daily at 5 a.m.

In addition to sharing NJ Spotlight's content, the Center sought out and shared other visual and graphic content that could be republished by NJ News Commons members. For example, the Center worked with Holy Name Medical Center to make photos its staff photographer shot inside its hospital available for reuse; additionally, the Center worked with Montclair State University photojournalism professor Thomas E. Franklin to make some of his images available for republication. Graphics from Stephen Stirling's Coronaviral newsletter and from Big Local News' COVID-19 Global Case Mapper were sent via email to NJ News Commons members.

The daily newsletter and the NJ News Commons listserv and Facebook page also became vehicles for Center staff to share other tools, guides and grant opportunities. Early in the pandemic, a variety of journalism-related relief funds were available from a variety of sources, including Facebook and Google, among others. Two NJ News Commons members were awarded substantial grants, one as a direct result of the Center's assistance. And myriad guides and playbooks were published to help mediamakers better

cover the pandemic and learn to work within its confines. At an almost daily pace, especially in April and May, the Center shared each such item as it became aware of them.

The Center also focused its newsletter [The Local Connection](#) on COVID-19. The newsletter provides story ideas and frequently includes links to stories that are available for republication at no cost.

## TRANSLATION

Over the past year the Center has worked to develop relationships and partnerships with ethnic, immigrant and community media in New Jersey. It was clear quickly that mediamakers in this space not only needed access to statewide COVID-19 stories, but they also needed them in languages other than English.

Due to language barriers in immigrant communities and the [lack of nuanced and informed reporting from their languages and perspectives](#), many immigrants are at the bottom of the news chain. And with limited translated news information, if any, from state and federal health agencies, about the coronavirus, these already underserved audiences are more vulnerable to disinformation.

One of the earliest initiatives that the Center launched shortly after setting up its partnership with NJ Spotlight was a [translation program](#) for COVID-19 stories.

The Center tested the translation program in March 2020, with a focus on Spanish. By April 2020 the program was expanded to two more languages, Korean and Chinese. The Center selected reporters at three news organizations to serve as translators; this helped to ensure that in addition to accurate translation, the stories would run in an ethnic media publication. The reporters included Kleibeel Marcano of Reporte Hispano; Rong Xiaoqing of Sing Tao Daily; and Jongwon Lee of The Korea Daily.

Each week, the Center selected various COVID-19-related stories published by NJ Spotlight News and later by NorthJersey.com, had them translated into Spanish, Korean and Chinese, and made them available to all NJ News Commons partners to republish or rebroadcast with proper attribution.

This resource exchange also may have attracted new audiences for each partner. Reporte Hispano, Sing Tao Daily and The Korea Daily published most of the translated stories, sometimes on their front pages. NJ Spotlight News created [En Español, a landing page on its website](#) where it posted all stories translated into Spanish by Reporte Hispano.

The translation program was funded by a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

## ETHNIC MEDIA FELLOWSHIPS

In March 2020, when the novel coronavirus had rapidly spread and reached the stage of pandemic, [Urdu News USA](#) and [The Weekly Bangla Patrika](#) reported about hundreds of COVID-19-related deaths in their communities that almost none of the mainstream news outlets in New Jersey talked about.

And while the news coverage largely keyed on the lockdown as the number of coronavirus infections and deaths were increasing by the hour across the country, Chinese-language [Sing Tao Daily](#) and the Filipino [OSM! Magazine](#) looked at how their communities resorted to traditional medicine as preventive treatment of the coronavirus even though U.S. health care professionals continued to remain skeptical of its usefulness and efficacy.

The coronavirus laid bare not only the nation's racial disparities and health inequities, [disproportionately affecting lower-income immigrants and families of color](#), but it also exposed, to a critical degree, scapegoating in American media.

For example, a number of African American newspapers reported that the media coverage zeroed in on diabetes or obesity as the major causes of higher rates of coronavirus infections and deaths among people of color. Early news coverage overlooked the systemic biases and economic inequities that had caused many of these pre-existing conditions, including limited access to healthy food and proper health care for people of color.

"It's not the stories that they are missing — [it's the context](#)," said Rong Xiaoqing, of Sing Tao Daily, one of the reporting fellows. "We can find the



threads and connections between today's stories and [the people we serve] because we have been deeply embedded in our communities — and that gives us an insight that the mainstream media could easily miss.”

This is why the Center launched a **COVID-19 Reporting Fellowship** for New Jersey ethnic and community media. The six-month reporting fellowship was built to provide direct funding to support the production of at least two stories and a stream of news and information on COVID-19 to ethnic media reporters and editors via regular telebriefings. The 16 fellows each received \$1,500 to support their work.

The fellows were a diverse group of 16 multimedia reporters and editors who report on and for the African American, Honduran, Mexican, Peruvian, Korean, Filipino, Arab, Bangladeshi, Turkish, Hungarian, Arab, Pakistani and Chinese communities in New Jersey. The majority of the fellows have been reporters for ethnic media for more than 15 years.



*Hong Su and 20 other acupuncturists in New Jersey formed a team to develop a traditional Chinese medicine formula as food supplements for COVID-19 patients. Photo by Hong Su.*



Fellows' stories were published or broadcast in Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Urdu, Bangla, Hungarian, English, Arabic and Filipino/Tagalog. Additionally, all stories not originally produced in English were translated into English.

Notably, one of the fellows from K-Radio AM 1660 [did a two-part podcast series in Korean](#) looking at how Korean families struggled to host a decent funeral service for loved ones who died of COVID-19. When one father died at the peak of the coronavirus outbreak, the family that he left behind had a hard time finding the right funeral services; for a time his remains were kept in a plastic bag with a name tag.

Another fellow from [The Latino Spirit](#) [did a five-part series of video essays](#) that focused on more than 10 Latino essential workers in New Jersey, examining how they kept themselves safe and healthy while helping businesses stay afloat.

The Shore News, a weekly serving the African American community, reported on [the mental health of Black residents in Atlantic City](#). The Philadelphia Weekly examined how essential Black workers in Camden, N.J., were compensated as well as how businesses in South Jersey were coping with the shift from traditional in-person business to online only.

The hardships that undocumented immigrants face in the time of a public health crisis stood out in the fellowship stories.

Both Reporte Hispano and New Jersey Hispano looked at how the administration of Gov. Phil Murphy was helping undocumented Latino families, while Amerikai Népszava chronicled the lives of undocumented Jewish Hungarians in Teaneck, N.J. El Latino News/The Nubian News explored the condition of undocumented Latino families who refused to access public services and health care in New Jersey due to fear that I.C.E. or immigration authorities would apprehend them.

In total, the Center hosted four telebriefings to support its COVID-19 reporting fellows. A couple of weeks before the official announcement about the fellowship, the Center hosted its first virtual briefing [about reporting on COVID-19 with Stephen Stirling](#), a former investigative reporter for NJ.com who started his own daily newsletter called Coronaviral to catalogue updates

and information about the way COVID-19 is impacting New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Stirling later did a second similar session for the Center.

After that, the Center hosted a seminar with Montclair State University epidemiologists Dr. Stephanie Silvera and Dr. Sze Yan Liu. This seminar gave fellows COVID-19 statistical data and context on race, age, gender and geography in the state.

A third webinar featured two veteran journalists who had been covering the coronavirus pandemic from a statewide perspective. Those journalists, Lindy Washburn of NorthJersey.com/The Record and John Mooney of NJ Spotlight News, shared insights from their reporting and ideas that others could pursue.

The COVID-19 fellowships were supported thanks to funding from [Democracy Fund](#).



## LOVED AND LOST

At the time this report was written, more than 16,000 New Jersey residents had died due to COVID-19, leaving countless family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers to grieve. The impact of such a tremendous and swift loss was hard to imagine. However, many New Jersey media organizations tried to find their own ways to pay tribute to the lives lost.

At the beginning of the pandemic, NorthJersey.com/The Record set out to memorialize every New Jersey resident who had died of COVID-19 through a project named Loved and Lost. Just a few weeks later—with the death toll growing rapidly—the Center joined forces with journalists there to take over project management of Loved and Lost, with a goal of making it a statewide collaborative.

Thanks to support from the Nicholson Foundation, the Center relaunched Loved and Lost in June as a statewide collaborative. Chantee Lans was first hired to oversee the work, followed by Betsy Abraham. The ongoing project first aims to identify the more than 16,000 New Jersey residents who have died due to COVID-19 by including their names, hometown and links to obituaries or public tributes on the central [website's Wall of Names](#). The secondary goal is to write profiles on as many of these individuals as possible, with the help of media partners, journalists and storytellers across the state.

Early in the project, the Center created and promoted a submission form where families could share the names and stories of loved ones who died from COVID-19. Editors at NorthJersey.com had also identified hundreds of others through death notices, social media, tribute sites and stories written by news organizations. A Google Sheet was created to collect all the data, and it is continually updated as new names are identified.

More than 20 media partners and individual storytellers have joined Loved and Lost. They have helped to promote the project, write obituaries, edit pieces submitted by freelancers and share profiles they published with other media partners. Funding allocated for freelancers also helped the Center recruit several writers.

By mid-November, Loved and Lost had collected and verified more than 800 names. And there is still much work to be done. One of the biggest challenges the Center faces with Loved and Lost is identifying the thousands of New Jersey residents lost to COVID-19. This is achieved in large part through project promotion, so family members know they have an easy, direct way to contact the Center about a loved one they've lost. Media partners have been a huge help in this regard by sharing information about Loved and Lost on their websites and social platforms as well as in their print products. Facebook ads about the project have also allowed the Center to engage a wider audience. Reaching out to community organizations, like houses of worship or funeral homes, did not seem to yield much information.

## FREELANCE FUND AND EQUIPMENT GRANTS

At the height of business shutdowns, journalists from various newsrooms across New Jersey experienced pay cuts or were furloughed or laid off. But in the midst of a health crisis, information can save lives. The Center attempted to support freelancers in the state by creating a **freelancer fund** and **reporting equipment stipend** to support local COVID-19 coverage and help local reporters pay for the tools and tech they need to work during a statewide lockdown.

Fifteen freelancers, many of whom were journalists of color, worked for ethnic media news outlets or reported on underserved communities, each received a \$1,000 reporting grant to support production of up to three stories, depending on the medium used and length or depth of work. All the freelancers—writers, audio producers, photographers, mapmakers, videographers, data visualization reporters and other media makers—worked with the Center as needed to get their stories published or broadcast by local New Jersey news organizations.

The freelancers wrote and produced stories on first responders, how creativity flourished in communities across northern New Jersey, the CARES Act, food stress, the rise in domestic violence cases during the pandemic, and how COVID-19 would impact elections, along with other topics.

“In early March, when I walked around the PATH Train station in Jersey City, I saw how businesses struggled and how scared people were,” said Gregg Morris, a freelance journalist for The Amsterdam News and an associate professor at Hunter College’s Department of Media and Communications. I wanted to document these struggles using my camera. The Freelance Fund helped me carry out my project idea, and I was able to produce a series of photo essays, tackling the economic and mental impact of COVID-19 on the lives of New Jerseyans.”

A \$250 stipend for reporting equipment was given to 20 New Jersey journalists to support the purchase of tools needed to better cover the pandemic. Such equipment purchases could include a webcam, microphone, backpack, personal protective equipment or a software/service subscription.

The funding for the stipends came from the **Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation**. Funding for the freelancers came from the Center’s general operating funds.

## MAIN OUTCOMES

Among the main five initiatives that the Center pursued, the following outcomes were identified:

- The Center built a framework for partnerships that could extend beyond the coronavirus and brought new partners to the table.
- Invited investigative journalists with extensive experience covering health issues in New Jersey to share their insight on how to cover a complex public health crisis. The training also enabled fellows to develop new knowledge and reporting skills related to covering a pandemic unprecedented in modern history.
- Built and strengthened relationships with ethnic media covering New Jersey.
- Included COVID-19 fellowship stories in a monthly newsletter sent out to the Center's members, journalists, funders and supporters, which improved access to critical information about the ethnic and immigrant communities affected by the coronavirus crisis in the state.
- More than 40 original multimedia stories including podcasts, videos, photos and narrative stories were produced and published or broadcast in eight languages—English, Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Urdu, Bangla, Hungarian and Korean. The fellowship funding enabled reporting that otherwise would not have been possible.
- More than 70 NJ Spotlight News stories about COVID-19 were translated from English into Spanish, Chinese and Korean. These stories were republished in Reporte Hispano, Sing Tao Daily and The Korea Daily. The translated stories catalyzed interest among some mainstream media partners; NJ Spotlight News created [a landing page on its website](#) where it posted all the stories that were translated into Spanish. NorthJersey.com posted several of the Korean translations on its site.
- The original stories and the translated stories helped to inform readers and viewers in their native language about the coronavirus (most of the information on COVID-19 that the CDC and state agencies released was not translated into multiple languages). "The limited number of our staff, which focuses mainly to cover issues related to



the Hispanic community, has not allowed us to provide a broader and more general coverage of the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic in the state,” says Kleibeel Marcano of Reporte Hispano. “However, having these translations has allowed us to fill that gap and keep our readers abreast of the most relevant facts related to the pandemic.”

- Through the fellowship program, fellows attended as many as four separate training sessions and had access to other resources and support activities to boost their professional reporting capabilities. These activities also helped to strengthen the fellows as a cohort and developed a broader knowledge about other communities. “It was great to be able to talk through ideas and issues in other communities,” says Jongwon Lee, reporter for The Korea Daily-New Jersey. “What’s happening in the Black and Hungarian communities may be different from Korean, but we have a lot of things in common. These conversations helped each of our fellowship projects to be successful.”
- The 15 freelance reporters produced 35 stories published in 14 online, and print outlets.
- More than 800 COVID-19 victims in New Jersey were identified as part of Loved and Lost and nearly 200 profiles written, most of them by NorthJersey.com/The Record staff. Additionally, about two dozen news organizations and freelancers joined the project.

## CHALLENGES

Among the five core initiatives, some challenges and limitations encountered were directly related to the impact of the coronavirus. Others were logistical in nature.

Some of the challenges included:

- Tracking content sharing was difficult and often a manual process. Since the Center was sharing NJ Spotlight News stories and translations via email and allowing news organizations to copy and paste them into their own content management systems, there was little way to track how widely the shared content was being used. The Center, after the fact, set up Google Alerts on the tagline it asked people to use on all republished content but it didn't catch everything and was unable to catch anything that was broadcast or printed.
- Because offices and businesses were closed due to COVID-19, one of the challenges that fellows encountered was the difficulty of finding the right sources for their stories. Most of them did interviews on the phone or by email—and, in the beginning of the project when it was the peak of the pandemic, the photos used for their stories were taken by the people they interviewed.
- While the fellowship selection process was intended to identify reporters who had sufficient time to devote to their projects, working for a newsroom with a small staff and a big daily workload became overwhelming for several. A couple of fellows, unfortunately, were not able to complete their project requirements.
- The large pool of fellows contributed to a much longer process of editing and translating stories. Additionally, because the statistical data and information on COVID-19 often changed abruptly, making sure the stories were up to date on the day of the publication was challenging, especially for ethnic media outlets that are weekly or biweekly.
- It was difficult and time-consuming to onboard media partners to Loved and Lost, especially over the summer months when election news ramped up and news related to the coronavirus slowed. Some media partners were not interested or were confused about how they could participate.



Report designed by Joe Amditis.