



Grow + Strengthen: Revenue Final report

Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University

Summer 2021

Prepared by:
Joe Amditis

About the Center



The Center for Cooperative Media is a primarily grant-funded program based at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond.

The Center for Cooperative Media's flagship program is the NJ News Commons, which is a network of more than 300 publishers and dozens of freelancers in the state of New Jersey. The Center's work for the NJ News Commons focuses on regular communication and networking, training, coaching and support, grant opportunities, ecosystem research, coordinating collaborative projects and more.

Nationally the Center studies and advocates for the practice of collaborative journalism. That work includes maintenance of collaborativejournalism.org, an international database of collaborative reporting projects, a monthly newsletter, the publication of research studies and whitepapers and the annual Collaborative Journalism Summit.

The Center's work is financially supported by Montclair State University, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab Fund (a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Community Foundation of New Jersey) and the Abrams Foundation. To learn more about the Center and its work, visit centerforcooperativemedia.org and collaborativejournalism.org.

About this report

This report provides an overview of the Grow + Strengthen: Revenue program, facilitated by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. It contains an introduction to the program and its history, including a brief review of previous Grow + Strengthen iterations, a summary of the program's goals, a review of each awardee and their projects, and a breakdown of the awards and mentoring processes.

The report also includes a section related to the global coronavirus pandemic and the ways in which COVID-19 impacted the timeline and course of the program. The pandemic impacted virtually every aspect of this program – from the facilitation of the program to the implementation of the funded projects to the drafting of this very report. [Read this post](#) for more information about the ways in which the Center responded to support our partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

About the Grow + Strengthen program

Grow + Strengthen is a micro-grant and business coaching program facilitated by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. The overarching goal of the program, as referenced in the name, is to grow and strengthen the New Jersey local news ecosystem by providing funding directly to newsrooms and publishers across the state that are interested in experimenting with different ideas for generating revenue, growing their business or improving their journalism.

The program is geared specifically toward small and hyperlocal publishers that typically do not have the financial freedom to conduct revenue experiments or initiatives. These publications often serve specific communities, demographics, niche audiences, or other (often underserved) populations.

The Grow + Strengthen program was first launched in 2013 with a grant from the New Jersey Recovery Fund. The second iteration was launched in 2014. The first two rounds of disbursements in 2013 and 2014 funded a series of micro-grants aimed at start-up news sites and investigative reporting initiatives.

Five years later, the Center re-launched the program in December 2019 with a focus on funding projects that were geared specifically toward building financial capacity and supporting sustainability efforts for local New Jersey publishers.

The application process

The Center announced on December 16, 2019, that it would award micro-grants of up to \$5,000 to six news and information providers in New Jersey. In addition to the funding, grantees would also receive a one-year LION Publishers membership paid for by the Center, and six months of one-on-one business coaching from Kelly Gilfillan, chair of LION Publishers.

Applicants were asked to fill out and submit project proposals, which were then reviewed by a panel of judges including James Thompson of Free Press, Kelly Gilfillan of LION Publishers and Center director Stefanie Murray. We set the application deadline for Jan. 31, 2020 and gave our panel of judges until Feb. 7, 2020 to review and evaluate the proposals we received.

Each applicant was required to submit a timeline and budget for their project in order to be considered for a grant. Additionally, each grantee agreed to complete a mid-term and final project report and participate in a survey. They also agreed to share their learnings publicly, within reason.

In order to be eligible to receive funding, each application had to meet the following criteria:

- Applicants must be a current or prospective member of the NJ News Commons at the time of submission.
- Proposals must be explicitly tied to generating revenue or improving the sustainability of an existing New Jersey news and information business.
- Applicants must be based in or primarily covering New Jersey communities.

The scoring rubric

Applications were evaluated using a weighted scoring rubric that was designed by the Center to favor applicants who were low-income or those who identified as part of an underrepresented or marginalized group, as well as those who clearly laid out the details of their proposal.

The rubric was broken down into two scoring categories, which we referred to as the “objective” and “subjective” criteria. Each criterion was worth a certain number of points, which contributed to the application’s total subjective and objective score. Applications needed to meet or exceed a certain objective score before the application was sent to the judges for subjective scoring. When added together, applications that receive a combined score that met or exceeded a certain threshold

were given a final review. The six applications with the highest combined scores received funding.

We defined an “objective” criterion as one that was based on an immutable or self-identified characteristic, or one that is unfalsifiable. Examples include the race or gender identity of the applicant, the number of years the organization was active, or whether or not the applicant was a member of the NJ News Commons. Each criterion was assigned a point value based on its perceived importance or relevance to the central goals of the Grow + Strengthen program.

We defined “subjective” criteria as those characteristics of an application that were subject to interpretation or opinion. The three subjective criteria we used to evaluate the proposals we received were the project’s relevance to achieving sustainability; the feasibility of the proposed project; and the overall strength of the application. The judges were asked to consider all three subjective criteria and assign a point value on a scale of 1-10 for each application.

We received a total of 21 proposals from news and information providers across the state. Of those, 17 met or exceeded the objective scoring threshold and were sent to the judges for evaluation and subjective scoring. Of those, six were selected as grantees.

About the grantees and their proposals

Below you will find a list of the organizations that were selected to receive funding and support as part of the Grow + Strengthen: Revenue program, along with a description of the project they proposed and the community they serve.

New Brunswick Today

New Brunswick Today is a bi-lingual, community-driven, hyperlocal news outlet based in New Brunswick. It serves the people of that city and the students who live or go to school on the Rutgers-New Brunswick campus. Charlie Kratovil, NBT’s founder and editor, had recently launched a new website for the publication, which was funded primarily by digital advertising. With advertising revenue coming in, Kratovil said he was interested in spending more time focusing on ways NBT might grow the amount of revenue and support from readers and community members.

In order to accomplish this, Kratovil asked for funding to help expand NBT’s Spanish-language original reporting and to translate all of the publication’s existing English-language reporting into Spanish.

The Nubian News

The Nubian News is one of the only Black-owned and -operated hardcopy newspapers in New Jersey. It serves the people of Trenton and is published in both English and Spanish. The paper's owner and publisher, Kamau Kujichagulia, was looking to grow its footprint among the broader Trenton community while bringing in more revenue.

Kujichagulia applied for a grant to help launch a new community-created TV show that would bring local residents into the broadcast studio for a series of interviews about the community work and other happenings in Trenton that he felt was being underreported. Kujichagulia wanted to use the grant money to help launch a video- and multimedia-based advertising, promotion, and events service that he could bundle and sell to his current print advertisers.

NJ Pen

NJ Pen is an independent local news site covering nine municipalities in suburban Camden County. Founder and publisher Matt Skoufalos applied for funding to help launch what he called a "Good News Box," a curated selection of locally produced or supplied products based on a theme, packaged in a custom, NJ Pen-branded container. Skoufalos described the Good News Box as "a way to capitalize on consumer interest in curated subscription box services and my readers' interest in supporting small, local businesses."

The boxes were to be distributed at local businesses or during what Skoufalos called a "pick-up party," which would be organized by NJ Pen. The pick-up parties were also meant to serve as additional opportunities for community engagement, subscriber acquisition and local business marketing.

Civic Story

Civic Story is a nonprofit news site dedicated to advancing solutions-based reporting on environmental sustainability and civic change. The organization also spearheaded the NJ Sustainability Reporting Hub (SRHub), a reporting collaborative that provided stipends to newsrooms to host reporting fellows and publish environmental sustainability reporting. Susan Haig, Civic Story's founder and creative director, applied for funding to launch a "sponsor-member" program aimed at small businesses and nonprofits. In exchange for a fee, sponsor-members would receive courtesy reminders to share newsworthy information with the NJ SRHub team, which could then be conveyed to reporting fellows.

Montclair Local

Montclair Local is a non-profit, member-supported independent local news provider that was launched as a direct response to the consolidation of Montclair's media landscape after Gannett purchased North Jersey Media Group in 2016. In December 2019, Montclair Local became a non-profit newsroom with a board made up entirely of Montclair residents.

Executive director Anne Keys wanted to launch a program to provide social media training to the Montclair Local staff, while also training members of the community alongside her team of reporters. The goal was to have local business and nonprofit members join Montclair Local reporters in honing their social media skills to spark audience engagement, execute paid media and monetization campaigns, and increase membership.

Morristown Green

Morristown Green is a community news source serving the residents of greater Morristown. Owner and publisher Kevin Coughlin sought to produce a podcast series for Morristown and use it as a vehicle for monetization and revenue experimentation.

The goal was to build out sponsorship packages around each episode — identifying the best formats, themes, and marketing materials — and explore partnerships with other media organizations to co-promote and collaborate on the show.

Adapting to the pandemic

Less than a month after we announced the Grow + Strengthen: Revenue grantees and began distributing the grant funding, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy announced statewide lockdown guidelines and mandatory social distancing practices in response to the spread of the novel coronavirus around the United States and the world.

Our first and main priority was to ensure that our partners and grantees had all of the resources and support they needed to remain safe and healthy as they continued to provide critical information and reporting to their respective communities. We contacted each grantee individually and let them know that we would be relaxing the grantee obligations and that Center staff would be available to them whenever possible if they had questions or needed help.

Initially, the revenue experiments and sustainability efforts outlined in the grant proposals were to be conducted over a period of six months, during which time grantees were expected to document their efforts and provide a midterm report in

May and final report in early September 2020. In the face of the rapidly expanding coronavirus pandemic, we opted to push the deadline for the grantee midterm reports back by a month and let the grantees know that they could submit their findings when it was most convenient for them. Kelly Gilfillan also agreed to continue providing one-on-one business coaching during the lockdown for those grantees who were able and willing to move forward with their projects in whatever capacity made the most sense to them.

While all of the projects we funded were impacted in some way by the pandemic, the inability to meet with community members in person or in large groups fundamentally undermined some grantees' projects and made it virtually impossible for them to continue as originally outlined.

The killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer and the uprisings that occurred as a result also added to the already mounting workload and pressures on local news outlets in New Jersey and across the country. Our Grow + Strengthen grantees were not immune to those pressures, and several grantees mentioned COVID-19 and the difficulties associated with covering the uprisings in the midst of a pandemic in their midterm progress reports.

"COVID-19 has been the single biggest factor impeding my progress on this project," reported one grantee. "Our grant awards were announced the same week as the stay-at-home order in New Jersey, and since the pandemic hit, I've been almost singularly focused on keeping up with its local impact, working longer hours than ever before, and struggling to divert my focus to this project."

Another grantee referred to the financial challenges of remaining operational once the money they received from the Paycheck Protection Program ran out. "We are facing potential layoffs given that the PPP money is ending and we have much lower advertising revenues. Another hurdle is just having the time to focus on planning for the future when you're unsure of the present situation is a challenge."

"The move to online meetings has made the operations of local governing bodies even more opaque," another grantee reported, "and certain institutions are taking advantage of the confusion and chaos caused by the pandemic to muddy the waters around transparency rules, make public participation more challenging, and stymied the flow of information."

"Every 10 minutes, the governor issues another executive order, or someone dies, or a business makes a desperate plea for help," said another grantee. They continued: "And now we have not one, but two cataclysmic crises. The police killing of George Floyd has spurred area protests and commentaries that deserve comprehensive coverage and demand the utmost sensitivity."

While the pandemic did make certain in-person aspects of various projects impossible, several grantees were still able to make progress. “What we've found out is it isn't that difficult going out getting something on video. The challenge is getting it off the camera and into some semblance of order. Editing is the constraint.” They continued: “A couple of things we wanted to do which have been curtailed because of COVID-19 are panel discussions and in-studio interviews. That was supposed to be our main goal. But it's okay because right now we really don't have the resources to do all those things.”

Grantee successes and achievements

While the impacts of the pandemic and the racial justice uprisings on local businesses and newsrooms cannot be overstated, our grantees were nonetheless able to make some meaningful progress toward the completion of their proposed projects.

Despite contracting COVID-19 over the summer, Kevin Coughlin was able to produce the first season of the Morristown Green podcast and turn it into a revenue-generating asset. Coughlin said the podcast “figured prominently in helping me land an account” that will sponsor upcoming episodes of the show. “Being able to offer the podcast in a package that includes traditional ads helped me convince the [sponsor] to come aboard,” Coughlin added.

Anne Keys of The Montclair Local learned “how to manage our online real estate membership ads and buttons, as well as linking our ads to Google analytics to track our goals.” Keys created email newsletter sign-up forms and was able to link them back to Montclair Local's customer relationship management (CRM) software. Her staff also learned how to create drip marketing campaigns. “We've raised over \$5,000 in revenues from general public sign-ups since we began implementing best practices,” Keys said. “Therefore, we've already made back what the grant provided. We feel a lot more confident going into our renewal push having been trained in best practices.”

As of December 2020, New Brunswick Today was able to bring on 19 additional monthly sustaining members since the beginning of the grant period and increased the number of unique monthly donors by roughly 42 percent. Monthly revenue is also up by 38 percent even without including a series of “significant one-time gifts,” according to Charlie Kratovil. And while NBT was unable to host the in-person fundraising event as originally planned due to the pandemic, it did host a virtual community fundraising event that garnered more than 2,000 views.

NJ Pen successfully distributed 100 of its “Good News Boxes” to residents and readers in its coverage area during the holiday season at the end of 2020. After

reevaluating the scope of the project, Matt Skoufalos decided to limit the distribution to a smaller, more manageable sample size. “Part of the innate challenge of the Good News Box has been finding out how to incentivize new subscribers to NJ Pen while supporting local businesses and without creating something so expensive as to be infeasible,” Skoufalos said. “That calculus is still being tweaked, but we are much closer to something workable than we were in the conceptual phase of the project.”

Conclusion

In the end, the project was successful in achieving its overall goal of providing financial and professional assistance to local New Jersey publishers as they attempted to improve or find new revenue streams for their publications. Unforeseen global catastrophes and ongoing national political turmoil made it somewhat difficult to assess the specific successes and failures of the program, especially compared to previous Grow + Strengthen iterations.

Still, the fact that the Center was able to assist a handful of NJ News Commons members as they attempted to navigate the last 18 months is demonstrably a net positive, both for the Center’s reputation and relationships and for the financial sustainability of the individual partners.