



Press Forward Chicago RFP

RFP Release Date:	February 23, 2024
Information Sessions:	February 27, 2024
Full Application Deadline:	March 25, 2024 at 11:59 p.m.
Site Visits:	As needed; April 11, 2024 - April 15, 2024
Funding Decisions:	April 16, 2024 - April 25, 2024
Announcements:	May 13, 2024 – May 17, 2024

Background:

Press Forward Chicago is a grantmaking initiative administered by The Chicago Community Trust and designed in partnership with the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and local journalism donors and practitioners. By making philanthropic investments in diverse local news outlets in the Chicago region, Press Forward aims to catalyze innovative solutions to the challenges facing local news, amplify impactful journalism practices, and grow financial investments into the media ecosystem to ensure residents have access to relevant, credible, and trusted information.

Across the nation, closures and cutbacks have marred the landscape of local journalism, leaving many communities without vital sources of information. And while Chicago media has experienced financial challenges, our region presents a different reality than many metropolitan regions, with more than 100 independent media outlets that contribute to the city's rich diversity of voices. Secure and sustainable funding remains a pressing challenge for many of these outlets. Embracing this imperative, newsroom leaders are actively working to diversify their income sources. However, despite their efforts, many of these outlets lack capacity-building tools, threatening residents' access to high-quality and culturally responsive news sources.

Recognizing the critical role journalism plays in the civic health of our city, Press Forward Chicago was created to support efforts that enrich the quality, reach, and diversity of news reporting in the Chicago region. This Request for Proposal will focus on capacity building support and aims to advance opportunities for journalists and newsroom leaders to learn from each other, share best practices, and develop strategies for sustainable journalism. This funding opportunity will bring together some of the region's most innovative local news organizations to identify and co-create learning activities that include individual and organizational growth components, meeting several times over the grant period as a peer learning activity.

Through its investments, Press Forward Chicago seeks to:

- Foster a more equitable news ecosystem that represents and serves the diverse tapestry of our city's population;

- Scale proven strategies and innovations that address the challenges of today's media environment; and
- Revitalize the local news infrastructure, ensuring robust reporting on critical issues facing Chicago's communities.

Need/Opportunity Statement:

Chicago has a robust news ecosystem that includes hyperlocal and regional news outlets that meet the information needs of Chicago's communities. However, many of these outlets have expressed the need for support in navigating the complexities of the media landscape, including adapting to digital transformations, diversifying revenue streams, and building sustainable business models.

While they are uniquely positioned to understand and address the nuanced concerns of specific neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds, many lack the financial capacity to sustain and grow their operations. Newsroom leaders are working hard to diversify their income sources and other resources needed to acquire and implement the latest strategies and tools for sustainability. Other challenges have resulted from the need to access better tools to manage the business side of the news, such as audience analytics, revenue generation strategies, and digital distribution platforms. As a result, many communities experience gaps in coverage, and newsrooms experience chronic operational shortfalls.

A healthy local news ecosystem helps to bridge information gaps and strengthen the social fabric by connecting residents and empowering them to participate in shaping the future of their communities. Local news serves as the lifeblood of a vibrant civic infrastructure by informing residents about crucial issues. Communities with active civic engagement tend to have greater social cohesion, increased access to resources, and a higher quality of life for residents across socioeconomic backgrounds. By providing residents with the information and tools they need to engage meaningfully in civic life, local news outlets can contribute to creating a more equitable society where opportunities are accessible to all.

The Chicago region's news and information ecosystem stands at a pivotal moment where it must take decisive action to secure its future. Press Forward Chicago aims to support newsrooms by providing capacity-building resources and necessary support to thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

The goals of this funding opportunity are to:

- Expand opportunities for hyperlocal or regional media organizations that reflect, serve, and amplify the voices of community members from across Chicago, with an emphasis on news and information platforms that foster a sense of collective purpose and embrace the value of co-creating with residents and media colleagues.
- Support hyperlocal or regional media organizations seeking to increase their current reach through audience expansion and the adoption of new business strategies and approaches; and
- Build the capacity of media and information outlets that demonstrate proven success in strengthening collaborative relationships with community members and their capacity to seek collaborative partnerships with media colleagues that create conditions to amplify community-driven stories and concerns.

Priority Strategies and Activities:

Press Forward Chicago is eager to consider proposals that address one of the funding priorities below. Grants will recognize organizations' ongoing efforts to utilize civic journalism and storytelling platforms that amplify the voices of community residents and storytellers, expose critical issues identified by the community, and ignite and inform resident-driven actions.

Sustainability: Organizations developing new, scalable business models for financial sustainability in local news.

Equity and Inclusion: Organizations and initiatives focused on closing the gap in representation and coverage of marginalized communities.

Audience and Community Engagement: Efforts to deepen connections between newsrooms and the communities they serve, enhancing civic participation.

Technological Advancement: Proposals that leverage technology to distribute local news more effectively and engage audiences more deeply.

Example activities can be found under the Additional Information tab.

Grantmaking Criteria:

This funding opportunity is for capacity-building project support only. Organizations that submit a full application will be evaluated based on their capacity to provide services rooted in equity and best practices that meet the priority strategies outlined above.

Grant Amounts Available and Grant Term:

This funding opportunity is for two years of capacity-building support. Grant recipients are expected to meet The Chicago Community Trust's requirements for submitting financial and narrative reports at the midpoint and end of the grant cycle.

Press Forward Chicago will award up to 15 grants between \$100,000 and \$125,000.

Peer Learning Community

In its inaugural year, Press Forward Chicago is committed to leveraging the collaborative ethos of Chicago by establishing a peer learning community with grant recipients. This initiative will collaborate with a backbone organization to offer practitioner, organizational, and network support to foster greater collaboration and bolster the journalism community's capacity to operate more effectively. The peer learning network will convene quarterly, with touchpoints determined by the backbone organization. By applying for a grant in this cycle, applicants commit to active participation in this peer learning community.

Eligible Applicants:

- Applicants must be based in the Chicago region. Nonprofits, educational institutions, independent media outlets, and fiscally sponsored journalism projects with an operating budget of less than \$2,000,000 are eligible to apply.
- Collaborative efforts among multiple organizations are highly encouraged.
- Proposals should demonstrate a clear plan for impact measurement and sustainability beyond the grant period.
- Newsrooms that focus on underserved communities and those most proximate to the issues that are being covered.

To be eligible for a grant award, an applicant must be:

- A nonprofit organization with evidence that it (a) has been recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code; (b) is fiscally sponsored by a Section 501(c)(3) organization; or (c) is a governmental unit within the meaning of Section 170(c)(1) of the Code;
- Described in Section 170(b)(1)(A) of the Code, other than a “disqualified supporting organization” within the meaning of Section 4966(d)(4) of the Code; and
- Be located within and/or primarily serving residents of Cook County, Illinois and the five collar counties (Lake, McHenry, Will, DuPage and Kane).

Sponsored organizations without 501(c)(3) status must identify a fiscal sponsor as soon as possible and ask them to complete and certify an organization profile in The Chicago Community Trust’s grants management system, GrantCentral, before the sponsored organization’s application submission. Log in to GrantCentral at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/>.

Ineligible Uses:

- Capital campaigns or endowments
- Inherently religious activities
- Political lobbying or campaigning
- Activities not aligned with the stated goals or objectives of the grant program
- Personal expenses or benefits to individuals unrelated to the project or organization's mission
- Payment of outstanding debt

Evaluation and Learning:

The Trust is committed to achieving its long-term goals and outcomes. Your theory of change (how the actions you take contribute to the outcomes identified) should inform the outcomes you select. Each funding priority includes a set of outcomes, specific, time-limited measures of progress, and indicators that define how you will measure progress over the grant period. Measures of progress provide measurable and reportable evidence that a proposed project or organization has effectively achieved – or is on the path to achieving – its objectives. These are what can be measured during the term of the grant period, contribute to longer-term outcomes, and are aligned with the Trust’s strategic priorities.

Grant recipients will be asked to report progress by completing the Actuals Column in the Measures of Progress section of their interim and final reports in GrantCentral at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/>.

We recognize there could be challenges to the implementation of any grant, many of which are outside the control of grant recipients and may prevent you from achieving your targets. Learning with you about the progress made towards your outcomes and measures is part of the Trust’s evaluation and learning efforts.

For potential or renewing grant recipients for whom developing metrics or workplans is a new activity or for those individuals who would like to learn more about developing Measures of Progress, the Trust will provide webinars, in-person sessions, and opportunities for ongoing peer learning. For specific questions, please contact learning@cct.org.

To define your measures of progress, complete the Measures of Progress (MOPs) section of the application to select outcomes, measures of progress, and aligned indicators you will be tracking across the time of the grant.

Select from the list of available outcomes and aligned MOPs defined under each funding priority below. We encourage you to limit the submitted Outcomes to one or two and Measures of Progress to three to five to minimize the reporting burden. Choose outcomes and measures of progress for one funding priority only. The funding priorities are as follows:

- **Sustainability**
- **Equity & Inclusion**
- **Audience & Community Engagement**
- **Technological Advancement**

Sustainability: Organizations developing new, scalable business models for financial sustainability in local news.

Outcome	Measure(s) of Progress
Expand Partnership Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in relationships that lead to new investments or economic opportunities • Changes in relationships that result in service provided for economic growth
Improve Overall Financial Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in revenue • Changes in the client’s ability to access loans, grants or other financial products

Increase Fundamental Business Finance Knowledge & Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in knowledge of financial management for business operations • Changes in access to and use of financial management tools and software • Changes in use of record keeping processes and tools for financial transactions
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Equity and Inclusion: Organizations and initiatives focused on closing the gap in representation and coverage of marginalized communities.

Outcome	Measure(s) of Progress
Build Knowledge & Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in # of reports/articles or publications • Changes in community accessing reports/articles or publications • Changes in events/convenings hosted/participated • Changes in # of new tools developed •
Increase in Organizational Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop staff skills and capacities to effectively provide services • Changes in the use of culturally relevant and aligned services

Audience and Community Engagement: Efforts to deepen connections between newsrooms and the communities they serve, enhancing civic participation.

Outcome	Measure(s) of Progress
Build Knowledge & Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in community accessing reports/articles or publications • Changes in events/convenings hosted/participated • Changes in actions as a result of the recommendations of residents
Escalate Awareness/Salience of Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the narrative/framing of the issue
Increase Coalition, Constituent and Organizational Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in organizational or constituent attitudes, skills, and knowledge • Changes in community participation

Technological Advancement: Proposals that leverage technology to distribute local news more effectively and engage audiences more deeply.

Outcome	Measure(s) of Progress
Build Knowledge & Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in # of reports/articles or publications • Changes in community accessing reports/articles or publications • Changes in events/convenings hosted/participated • Changes in # of new tools developed

Collection of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Demographic Data:

The Chicago Community Trust serves a wide variety of constituents and organizations. As such, we collect organizational demographic data to inform us about the diverse, representative, and inclusive staffing practices of our potential and current grant recipients. This data helps us ensure the organizations we fund are representative of the communities we serve. Therefore, we kindly request you report the demographics of your organization's board, leadership, and staff to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives as we work to achieve our mission of a thriving, equitable, and connected Chicago region. The demographic composition of the Trust staff and board is available on our website at <https://www.cct.org/about/dei/>.

Application Process:

Applicants must complete their application via GrantCentral, The Chicago Community Trust's online grants management system. To access an application, grant seekers must log into GrantCentral at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/>.

Applicants must complete and certify an Organization Profile prior to application submission. If the Organization Profile was completed for a previous funding opportunity, it must be reviewed and, if needed, updated and certified before application submission.

Sponsored organizations without 501(c)(3) status must identify a fiscal sponsor as soon as possible and ask them to complete and certify an organization profile in The Chicago Community Trust's grants management system, GrantCentral, before the sponsored organization's application submission. Log in to GrantCentral at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/>.

The Trust will not consider late or incomplete applications. Applicants may receive a site visit, telephone call, or other communication from foundation staff as part of the application review process.

Submission Deadlines and Other Key Dates:

- The Full Application deadline is **March 25, 2024**. The Full Applications will be reviewed and selected by The Chicago Community Trust.
- Review committee members will conduct site visits as needed between **April 11 and April 15, 2024**.
- Funding decisions will be made by **April 25, 2024**.
- Applicants will be notified of awards between **May 13 and May 17, 2024**. Applicants who submitted a Full Application but were not chosen for funding will also be notified.

Information Sessions:

An information session is scheduled for February 27, 2024, at 1 p.m. via [Zoom](#).

Contact Information:

For technical questions regarding GrantCentral, email grants@cct.org.

For programmatic and application content questions, email Press Forward Chicago at PressForwardChicago@cct.org.

Glossary:

Civic journalism refers to an approach emphasizing the role of journalism in fostering civic engagement, democratic participation, and community dialogue. It focuses on public deliberation, community empowerment, and involving communities in the news process to bridge connections between journalists and residents.

Hyperlocal refers to journalism or content focused intensely on a specific geographic community, typically a neighborhood or town, providing detailed and relevant information tailored to the interests and concerns of local residents.

Regional refers to news coverage or media outlets focusing on a specific geographic area larger than a single city but smaller than a nation. It provides news and information relevant to residents within that defined region.

Community-centered refers to reporting that prioritizes identified communities' needs, interests, and input. It involves engaging with community members, amplifying their voices, and addressing their informational needs and concerns.

Additional Information:

The following activities encourage innovative thinking among grant applicants and do not represent a complete or exhaustive list of funding-eligible capacity-building projects/programs.

Sustainability: *Examples include establishing a membership program that offers exclusive content, community forums, and special events to members; leveraging crowdfunding; growing a local news outlet consortium or collaborative that pools resources for reporting, fundraising, and technology; implementing a micro-payment structure for individual articles or short-term access; education/academic partnerships; syndication and licensing.*

Equity and Inclusion: *Examples include developing a multilingual platform or strategy; producing a storytelling initiative and collaborating with the community to tell stories through various media formats; media literacy and civic engagement workshops and training opportunities that support residents in critically engaging with local news; implementing a*

model of reporting that includes community members in the journalistic process; creating an accessible, understandable database of local government data.

Audience and Community Engagement: *Examples include creating and implementing a community advisory board; developing participatory projects that involve community members in the reporting process; hiring neighborhood news correspondents; offering journalism workshops for young people on reporting, ethics, and media production; hosting live community events, forums, or town halls that focus on local issues, news topics, or storytelling.*

Technological Advancement: *Examples include developing proprietary technology tools for reporting and content creation that can be licensed to other newsrooms; developing mobile applications that deliver news tailored to the user's specific location within Chicago; utilizing AR/VR technology to bring stories to life; implementing AI algorithms to curate personalized news digests for subscribers; creating dynamic and interactive data visualizations that allow users to explore local issues through data-driven storytelling; optimizing an e-newsletter for maximum engagement.*