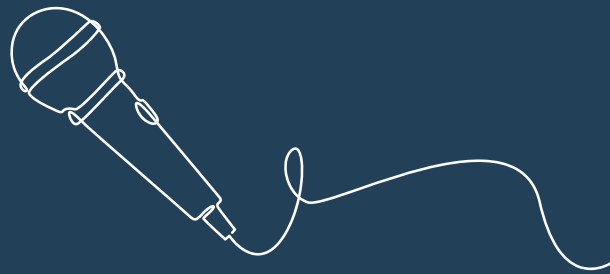




Chicago-area Local Media: Assessing the Need for Shared Services and Support



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Commissioned by
Press Forward Chicago at
The Chicago Community Trust

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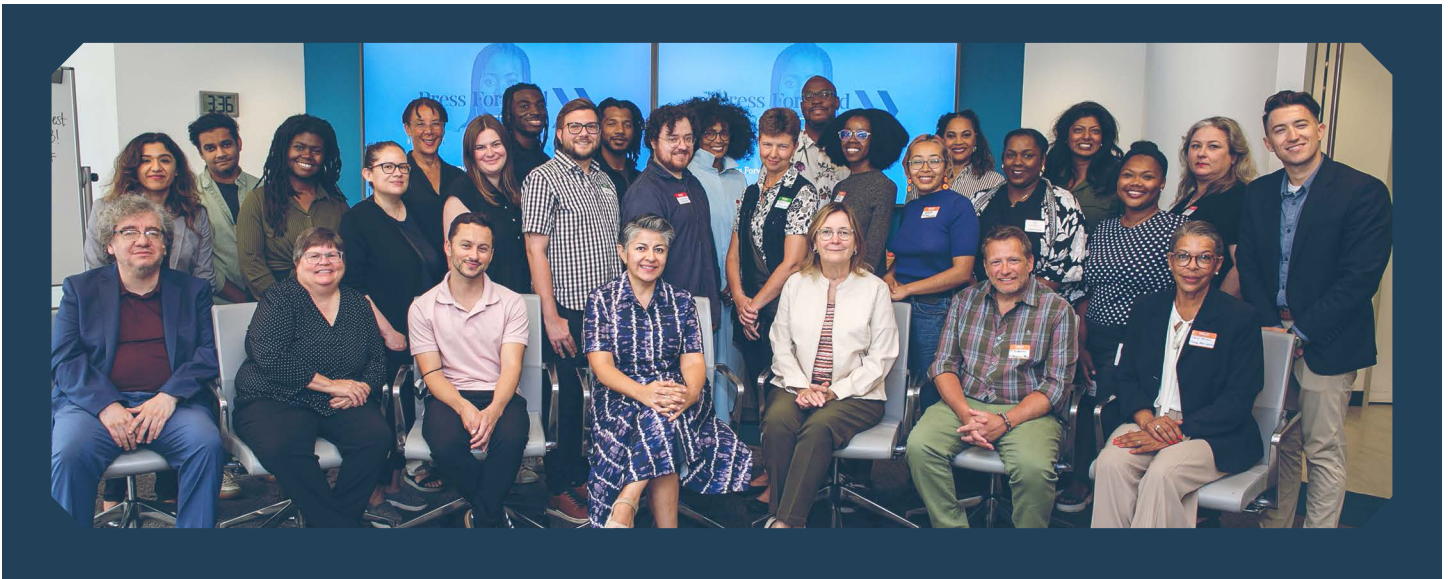
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I. Introduction

i. Executive summary

Newsrooms across the country are under threat and under-resourced. The costs of services, such as legal assistance, health insurance, printing, delivery, and content analytics tools, have ballooned—especially for small- to medium-sized newsrooms—and revenue has not kept up. In addition, traditional sources of revenue, especially advertising, have been decimated.

What would a thriving media ecosystem look like? Are some organizations either too big or small to succeed? Is there one new model that will save the day for local journalism?

What we do know is that there is a lot of great journalism happening at organizations of all sizes. Chicago is a unique site of collaboration and innovation in the national media ecosystem. A tapestry of local and hyperlocal outlets serve our diverse neighborhoods and populations.

That's where Press Forward Chicago comes in. We are part of a national movement of funders supporting sustainability in local journalism. Launched in 2023 and housed within The Chicago Community Trust, the Chicago chapter has so far awarded \$1.6 million in its first round of grants, focused on diversifying revenue streams and filling gaps in coverage.

We recognize a unique opportunity to pool resources as an industry. We see this as a starting point for media sustainability and self-sufficiency—to make sure communities have the best and most authentic information they need and deserve. We are excited to work with local media to create multiple models for success, which includes deploying \$2 million in 2025 toward capacity-building grants and diving deep into shared services that can uplift multiple outlets at one time. This can be in audience analysis and growth, grant supports, marketing opportunities, editorial collaboration, and many other possible solutions.

In early 2025, the Press Forward Chicago team designed a survey to assess the needs and goals of local news in the Chicago area, incorporating feedback from our 13 inaugural grantees. We worked with Northwestern University graduate Audrey Azzo as lead researcher and received 78 completed surveys of 114 surveys sent to qualifying community-based media—a response rate of about 70%. The survey presented nine categories of services (known hereafter as “shared services”) as essential to the sustainable functioning of most newsrooms.

SHARED SERVICES		
<i>Business and human resources (HR) operations</i>	<i>Marketing, sales, and public relations services</i>	<i>Legal services</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounting services • Health insurance • Human resources • Auditing services • Payroll services • Business insurance • Media liability insurance • Meeting space, neighborhoods • Meeting space, downtown • Fiscal agent • Health and mental health supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising sales • Media kit/pitch decks • Public relations • Visual identity and branding • Social media • Public engagement • Marketing services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FOIA • Libel • Intellectual property • Pre-review on content • Contract review • 501(c)(3) transition • Employment law • Media public policy advocacy
<i>Website and tech support</i>	<i>Editorial services</i>	<i>Software and tools</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digitizing your archives • Cyber security and cyber protection • Webmaster support • Anti-spam filters • Website upgrade • IT services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo/image wire service • Print distribution • Multimedia products/equipment • Editing services (text-based) • Editing services (video or audio) • Podcasting services • Video services • Language translation services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content analytics • Transcription services • Content management system (CMS) • Digital publishing software • Revenue management and analytics software • Tech stack management, front-end and back-end website • Newsletter services • Cloud storage • Bookkeeping • Audio and visual editing • LexisNexis • AI tools
<i>Audience and market research</i>	<i>Fundraising</i>	<i>Professional development</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience growth • Demographic/market research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundraising support • Grant writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of staff • Training of management • Training of board members

We were intentionally open-ended and wide-ranging in our survey about the use of shared services to support Chicago-area journalism outlets. The solution of shared services is as varied as the types of media serving the Chicago area. This survey is the first phase in finding common denominators of need. The next phase of the research project will include focus groups and listening sessions with industry leaders and advocates. This will allow Press Forward Chicago to make decisions on which shared services to test and prioritize. The survey analysis highlights the need for fundraising and demographic market research among the Chicago-area local news community, regardless of the size or type of media outlet. Audience growth, research, and fundraising support were recurrent needs despite the vast differences within the local news ecosystem.

ii. Methodology

The data used in the analysis for the report came from the survey sent via email to 114 local community media outlets in the first quarter of 2025. Additional outlets were sent the survey, but either were no longer operating or did not ultimately meet the definition of a local journalism outlet—locally owned or controlled (or nonprofit), and with original reporting on news and/or culture. We did not include solely opinion-oriented entities, or those with no original journalism. We also did not include larger corporate-owned conglomerates and corporations, such as national newspaper chains or broadcast media. We did include one journalism support organization.



The focus area was the city of Chicago and nearby suburbs—not all of Cook County. Some suburban media outlets located farther from the city completed the survey (e.g., Aurora, Waukegan), but they were not the primary focus of this project. The list of outlets was carefully crafted by the team based on their knowledge of the Chicago local news ecosystem.

We translated the survey into Chinese, and we were prepared to translate into other languages if requested. An effort was made to seek a diverse array of foreign-language media, but more can be done in follow-up surveys to reach out to media with primarily foreign-language-speaking audiences.

Respondents were offered a \$100 honorarium payment for their participation. The survey was fielded over 44 days, starting February 18, 2025, with multiple extensions offered.

We received 78 full responses, achieving a response rate of about 70%.

The data cleanup and analysis process was performed on Google Sheets, and the mapping was done through ArcGIS. The fact-checking was performed in Python.

Each of the nine shared services categories contained a different amount of subcategories. All categories were weighted equally in the analysis.

The analysis also groups six types of newsrooms primarily based on their yearly operating budget. Other factors are also taken into account, such as audience reach, number of employees, business types (e.g., for-profit, nonprofit), and similarities in their responses to open-ended questions about their 12-month and 5-year plans.

The appendix section presents graphs displaying the percentage of yearly operating budgets currently spent on each category of services. The figures in the appendix will be referenced throughout the archetype and media type analyses in sections II.ii and II.iii.

iii. General Overview

Shared services needs assessment analyzed by organization size.
Scale is measured in percentage.

This graph illustrates that, regardless of outlet profile, most outlets prioritize fundraising and demographic/market research as shared service needs.

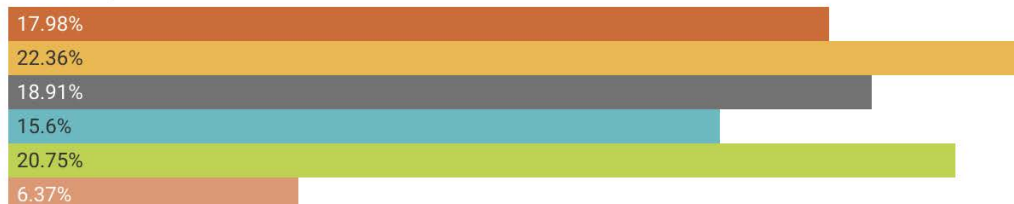
Overview of Shared Services Needs in Percentage Relative to Outlet Size

- Organization Size : Under \$100,000
- Organization Size : \$101,000-\$300,000
- Organization Size : \$301,000-\$500,000
- Organization Size : \$501,000-\$1 Million
- Organization size : \$1.1 million-\$2.9 million
- Organization Size: \$3million+

Legal services



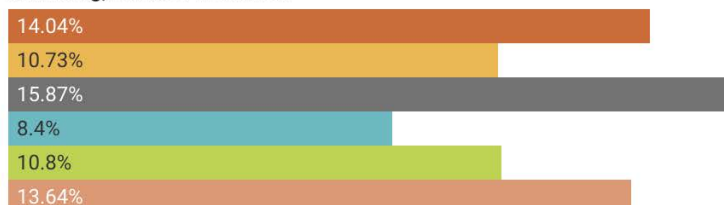
Fundraising services



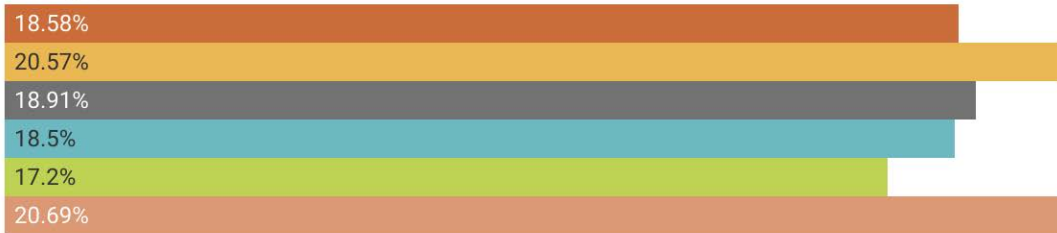
Business and HR operations services



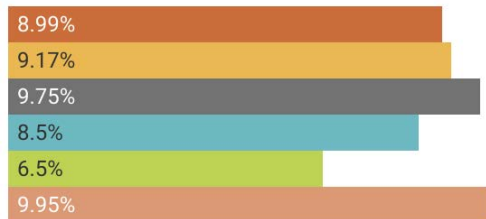
Marketing, sales & PR services



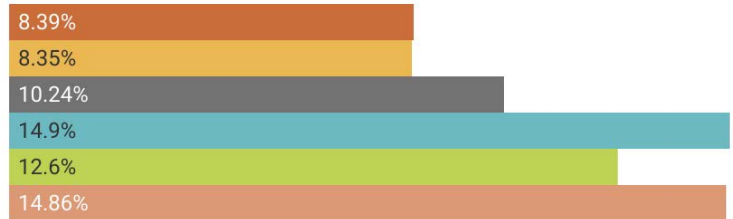
Demographic & Market research services



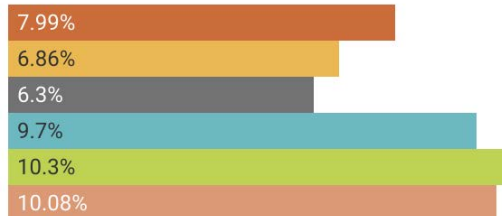
Editorial services



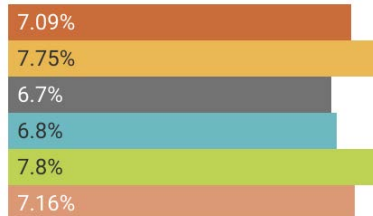
Professional Development services



Web & Tech services



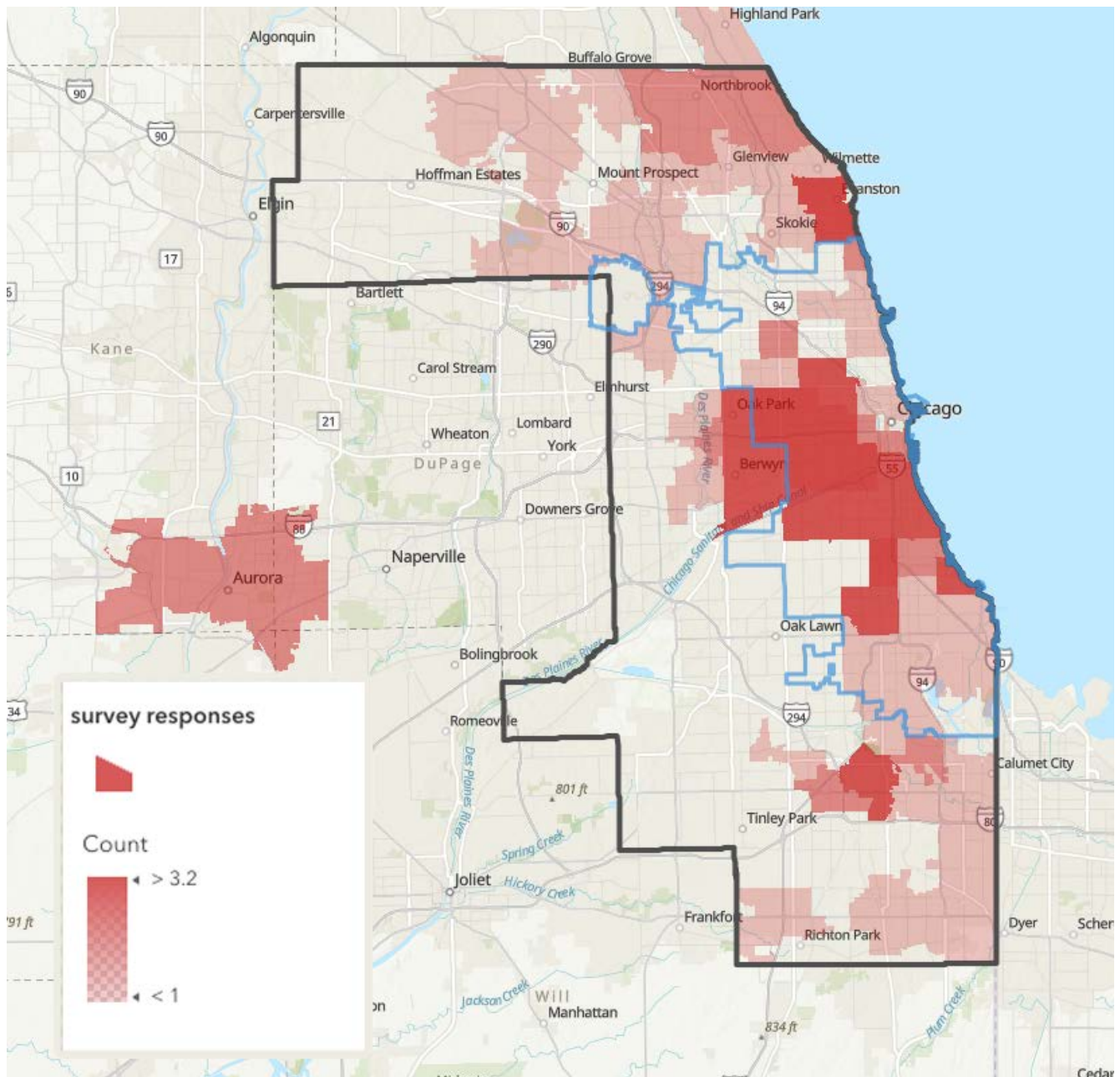
Software and tools



The chart highlights the following:

- All groups have a high need for demographic and market research services.
- Organizations that function with annual budgets above \$1M showed the highest interest in professional development services.
- All organizations have high needs for fundraising services. Respondents with budgets over \$3M are the only ones with significantly low needs for this category of services.
- The need for editorial services is standardized across most groups, with an average need of 9%, except for organizations with yearly operating budgets between \$1M-\$2.9M.
- Respondents with operating budgets below \$100K and above \$3M have the highest expressed needs for legal services, at almost 10%.

iv. Map: Visually representing the top 5 areas of coverage



We asked outlets their top 5 geographic areas covered. Many outlets are city-wide or region-wide, so this offers insight into geographic representation and primary coverage zones in the Chicago area

Black outline - Cook County Borders

Blue outline - Chicago Borders

Red polygons - Community areas and zip codes covered by the survey participants

Darker red shades - Indicated higher density of coverage

Count - Number of times each community area was mentioned by our respondents

II. Results

i. Ranking: Shared services categories & subcategories

The following analysis ranks the nine categories in a descending order based on responses from the media outlets, regardless of the operating budget or organization size. The analysis weighs all categories equally regardless of the number of subcategories each incorporates.

Here is a list of the nine buckets with their subcategories, as prioritized by the media outlets in their survey responses:

a) Major shared services categories ranked in a descending order:

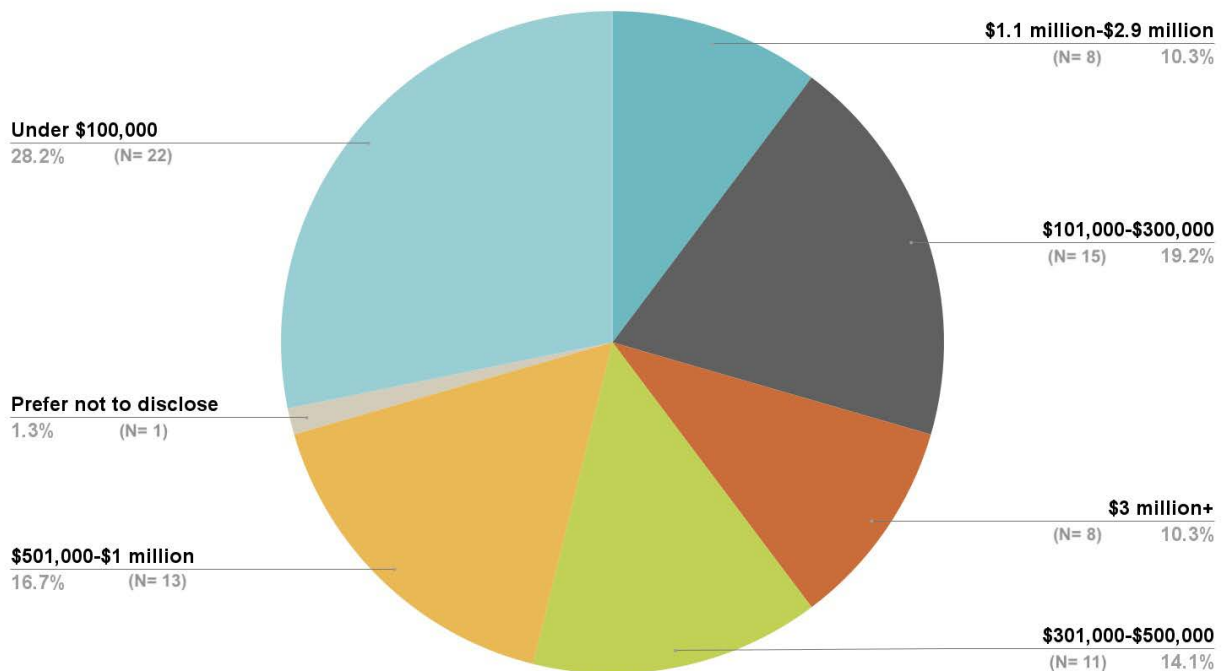
Ranked #1: Demographic and market research
Ranked #2: Funding & fundraising needs
Ranked #3: Marketing, sales, and public relations services
Ranked #4: Legal shared services
Ranked #5: Professional development
Ranked #6: Editorial services
Ranked #7: Website and tech support services
Ranked #8: Business and HR operations
Ranked #9: Software/tools

Top 10 shared services subcategories:

Ranked #1: Audience growth
Ranked #2: Demographic/market research
Ranked #3: Fundraising support
Ranked #4: Grant writing
Ranked #5: Advertising sales
Ranked #6: Marketing services
Ranked #7: Training of staff
Ranked #8: Training of management
Ranked #9: Media liability insurance
Ranked #10: Intellectual property

ii. Basic profiling of our respondents by yearly operating budget and business type

Overview of our respondents by yearly operating budget and business type



a) Figure 1: Yearly operating budgets respondents .

Yearly Operating Budget Relative to Business Type



b) **Figure 2.a:** Yearly operating budget relative to business type.

Around one fifth—20%—of our respondents operate with a revenue above \$1 million. Almost all respondents who disclosed a budget above \$1 million—except for one—identify as nonprofit newsrooms.

The most diverse business types are spotted in newsrooms that operate with budgets below \$500,000.

c) For-profit models within our respondent pool

55% of our respondents operate under a for-profit model, including those that are fiscally sponsored.



For-profit breakdown.

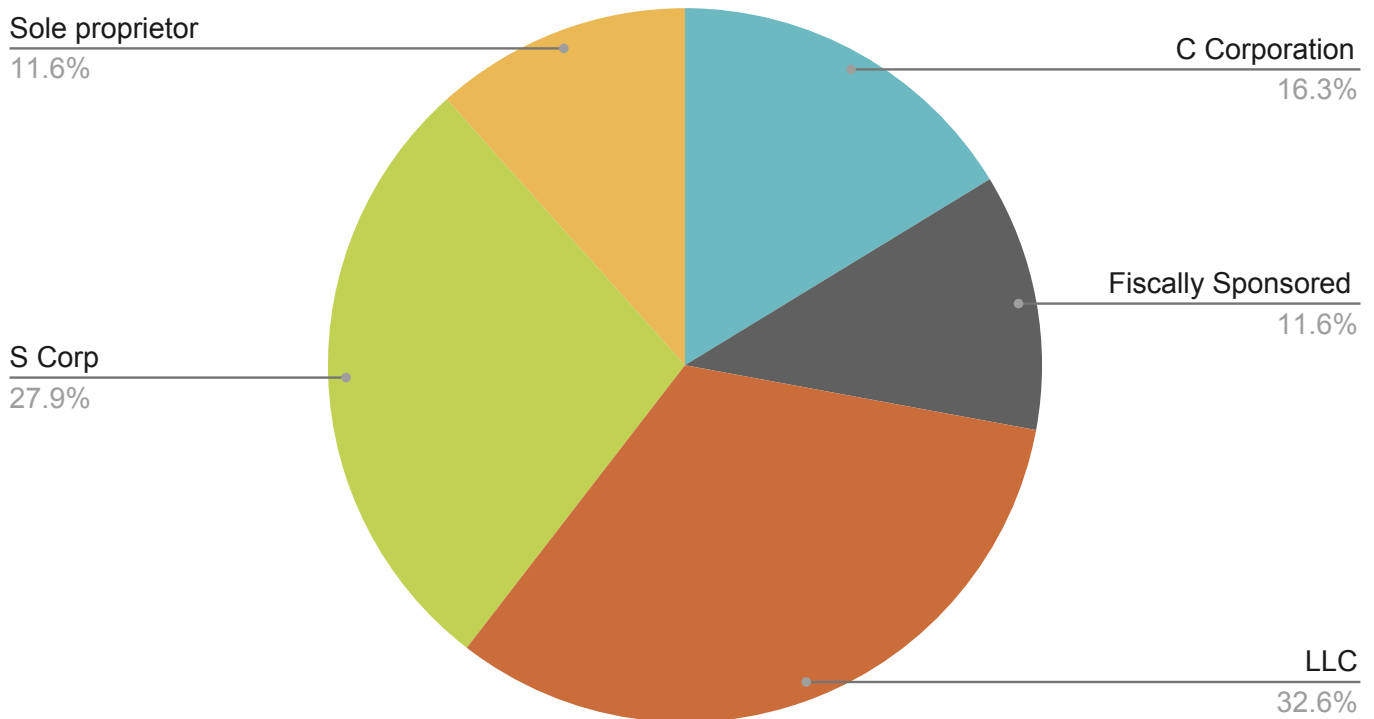


Figure 2.b: For-profit model breakdown.

iii. Archetypes: The six main groups and their shared services needs

a) Profile: Group A: Under \$100K.

Organization Size : Under \$100,000

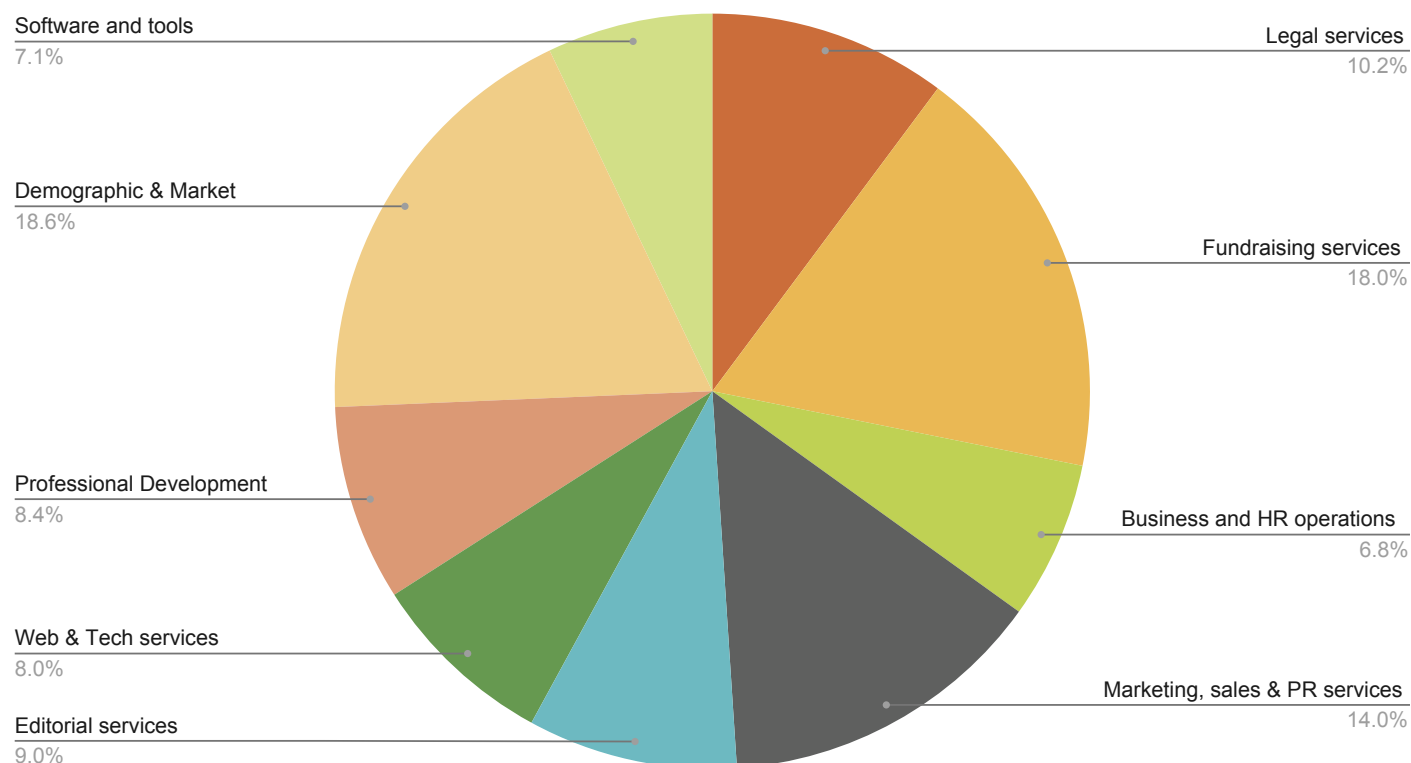


Figure 3: Organization size: Under \$100K

The majority of our respondents, 28%, fall under Group A (see figure 1).

Group A respondents highly ranked fundraising and demographic market research as needs. Each of these categories marked at around 18% of their expressed needs.

In addition, these organizations spend only 0.23% of their budget on audience market research and less than 1.5% of their budget on fundraising services (see appendix, figure G).

Separately, all respondents within Group A answered similarly to the open-ended question about their organization's top needs in the next 12 months. These priorities include finding new sources of revenue, and increasing their fundraising and advertising efforts.

These organizations also have similar responses to inquiries about their 5-year plan. But their ambitious plans to grow their audience, collaborate with other media, and expand their publishing infrastructure rely on the foundation of a robust and sustainable business model.

More than half of Group A respondents do not have full-time employees and rely on part-time staff, contractors, freelancers, and volunteers. The remaining outlets have less than two full-time staffers and rely on an average of 2-5 part-timers.

6.8% of respondents that fall in this group indicated interest in business and HR operations as shared services (figure 3) and yet they are among the highest spenders on this category of service, which costs them on average 17.7% of their budget (see appendix, figure D). This is likely because they have such a small budget to start with.

Likewise, only 8% of these respondents indicated interest in potential website and tech support shared services and yet this segment of our response pool spends the most on this category of services (26% on average, see appendix figure E) as well as other software and tools (7.6% on average, see appendix figure I).

Revenue streams in Group A:

We asked the 22 respondents in Group A to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category.

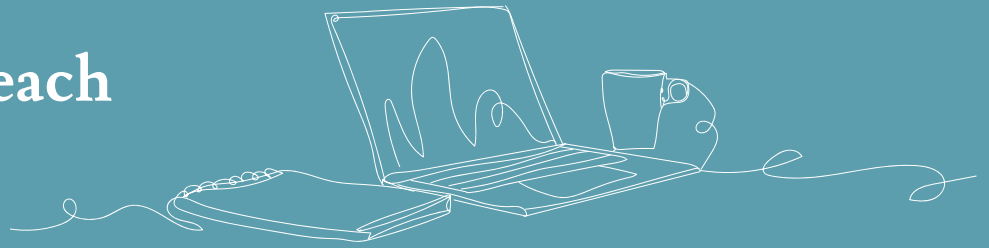
REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP A:		
<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group A</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Donations	12	49.3%
Ownership investments	9	48.5%
Sponsorships	3	36.7%
Foundation grants	6	35.5%
Other	6	34.8%
Advertising	14	29.1%
Fundraisers	2	14%
Memberships	3	5.3%
Events	3	4.3%
Subscriptions	4	3.5%

Outlets that fall under Group A rely on donations and contributions from owners. The latter is expected as the majority of Group A functions in a for-profit model (see figure 2).

Group A produces the most print products among all groups (see figure 9). Additionally, more than half of Group A uses advertising as a revenue stream; advertising averages 29% of their total revenue stream.

Memberships, events, and subscriptions are rarely used in this pool of respondents.

Audience Reach



- Outlets that send out newsletters reach a total of 88,195 unique subscribers. Only three outlets within Group A do not have a newsletter.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP A	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
0 - 1,000	12
1,001 - 10,000	9
10,000 and up	3

- Group A in total reaches 130,288 unique website visitors a month. Only four outlets do not have a website.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP A	
<i>Range of website visitors</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique website visitors</i>
0 - 1,000	5
1,001 - 10,000	5
10,000 and up	5

- Only 4 outlets in Group A host podcasts, with an average of 117 subscribers. The outlet with the highest reach has 200 subscribers.
- 30% of Group A has a YouTube channel. They have an average of 700 subscribers.
- The average print run for Group A is 1,320 per edition; the print distribution ranges between 400 to 2,500 print products distributed per edition. There are 10 outlets in this group that produce print products.

b) Profile: Group B: \$100K-\$300K

Organization Size : \$101,000-\$300,000

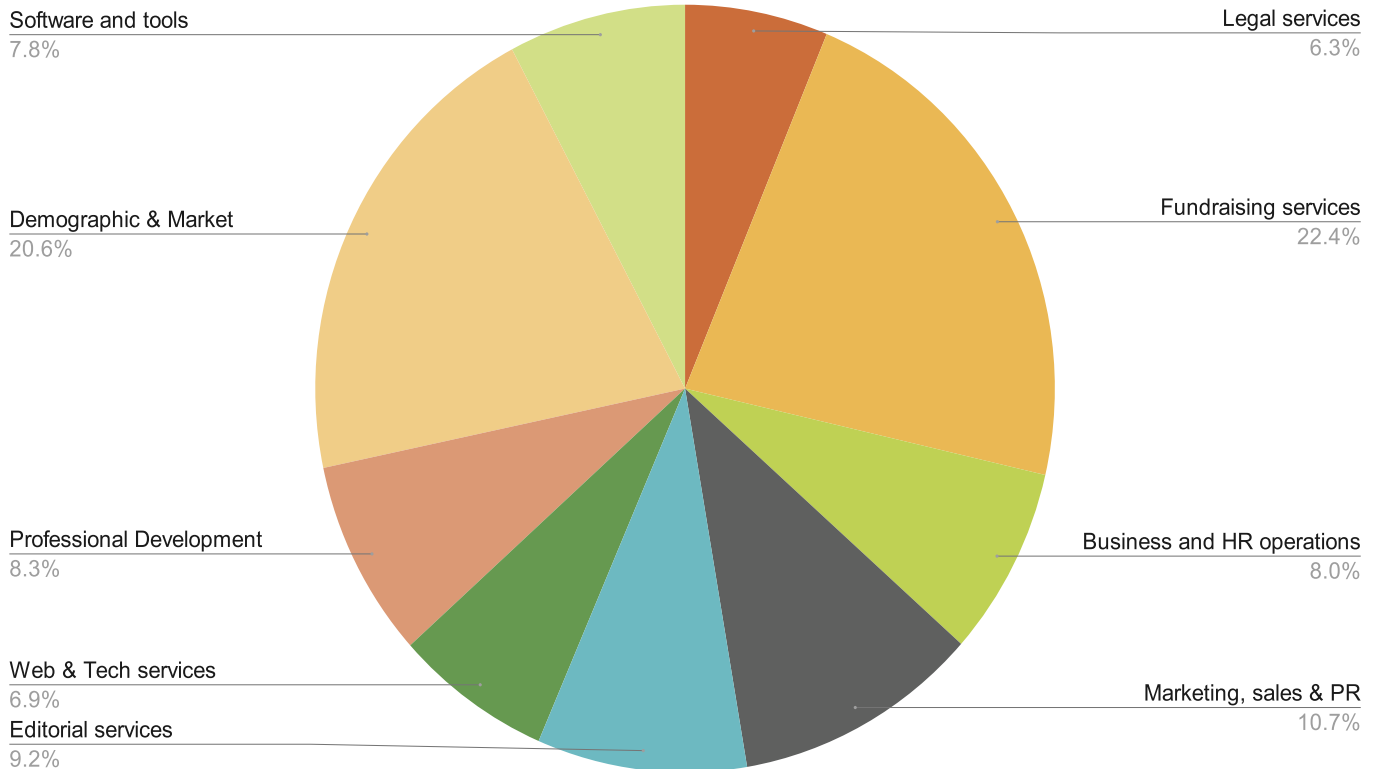


Figure 4: Organization size: \$100K-\$300K

Group B makes up 19.3% of our pool of respondents (see figure 1). We have a total of 15 respondents within Group B.

They also prioritize fundraising and demographic market research as shared services, spending around 4% and 1% of their budget on those respective categories (see appendix, figure H). In comparison to other groups, respondents that fall under this profile spend the most on fundraising out of all other groups (see appendix, figure J).

Their 12-month plans mention the need to increase fundraising efforts for the purpose of expanding their capacity and production of “more impactful local journalism in the communities we serve,” said one respondent. This purpose resonates among all respondents in this group. Their 5-year plans include maintaining current service levels and eventually scaling their work. Audience growth and engagement remains the north star of all of their upcoming projects.

Out of the 15 respondents in this group, eight organizations reported having no part-time employees and seven organizations report having 2-5 full timers. This indicates slightly higher capacity among this group compared to those who operate with a lower budget.

Their lowest expressed needs are legal services, which they spend 1.1% of their budget on.

Their highest spending is on editorial services (average of 8.8% of their total budget, see appendix, figure B). Only 9.2% expressed a need for shared support on the editorial side.

Revenue streams:

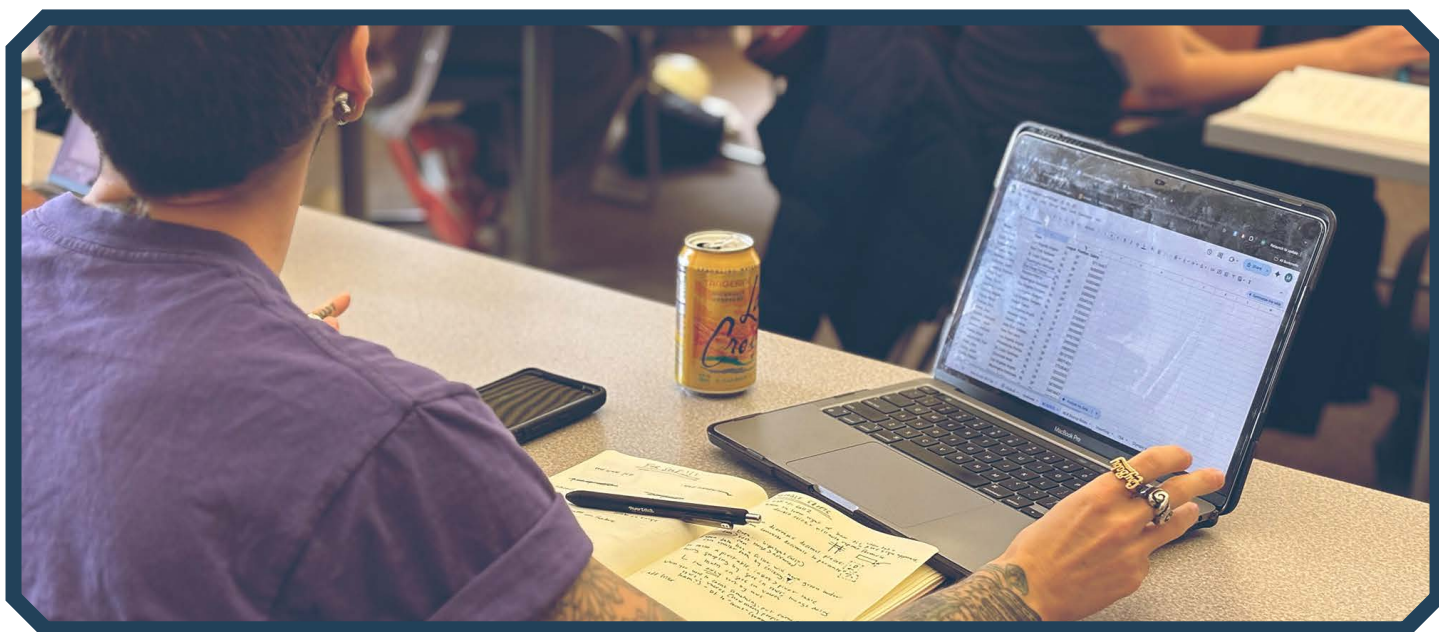
We asked the 15 respondents in this group to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category.

REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP B:

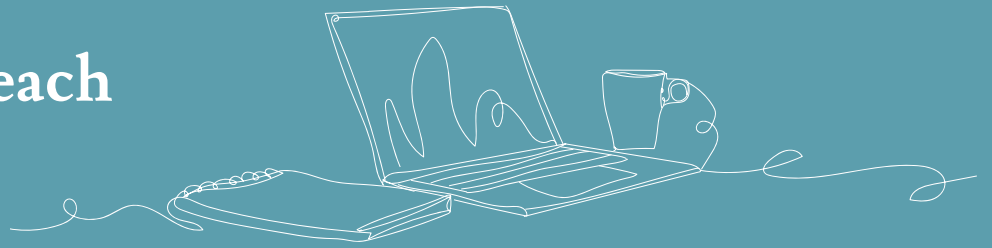
<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group B</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Foundation grants	11	52.1%
Memberships	3	51.3%
Subscriptions	3	39%
Ownership investments	3	23.3%
Advertising	10	22.6%
Other	4	20.5%
Donations	10	14.6%
Sponsorships	4	12%
Events	5	8.2%
Fundraisers	5	5.6%

The majority of Group B respondents rely on foundation grants at an average rate of 52% of their revenue stream. Donations are sought by almost all respondents, and represent on average less than 15% of their revenue stream.

Only three members use memberships and subscriptions—revenue streams that represent respectively 51% and 39% of their revenue streams.



Audience Reach



Audience Reach:

- All of Group B respondents share newsletters with their audiences, except for one outlet. They total 97,719 unique subscribers. The maximum reach is 20,000 subscribers.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP B	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
0 - 1,000	5
1,001 - 10,000	5
10,000 and up	5

- Group B totals 818,765 unique website visitors a month.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP B	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique website visitors</i>
0 - 1,000	5
1,001 - 10,000	5
10,000 and up	5

- Only 7 of 15 Group B respondents have a podcast, with an average of 2,628 unique listeners.
- Only 3 of 15 respondents host a radio show, with only one that has a significant reach of 65,000 unique listeners.
- The average print run for Group B is 2,625 per edition. The print run per edition ranges between 250 to 5,000. There are 3 outlets in this group that produce print products.

c) Profile: Group C: \$300K-\$500K

Organization Size : \$301,000-\$500,000

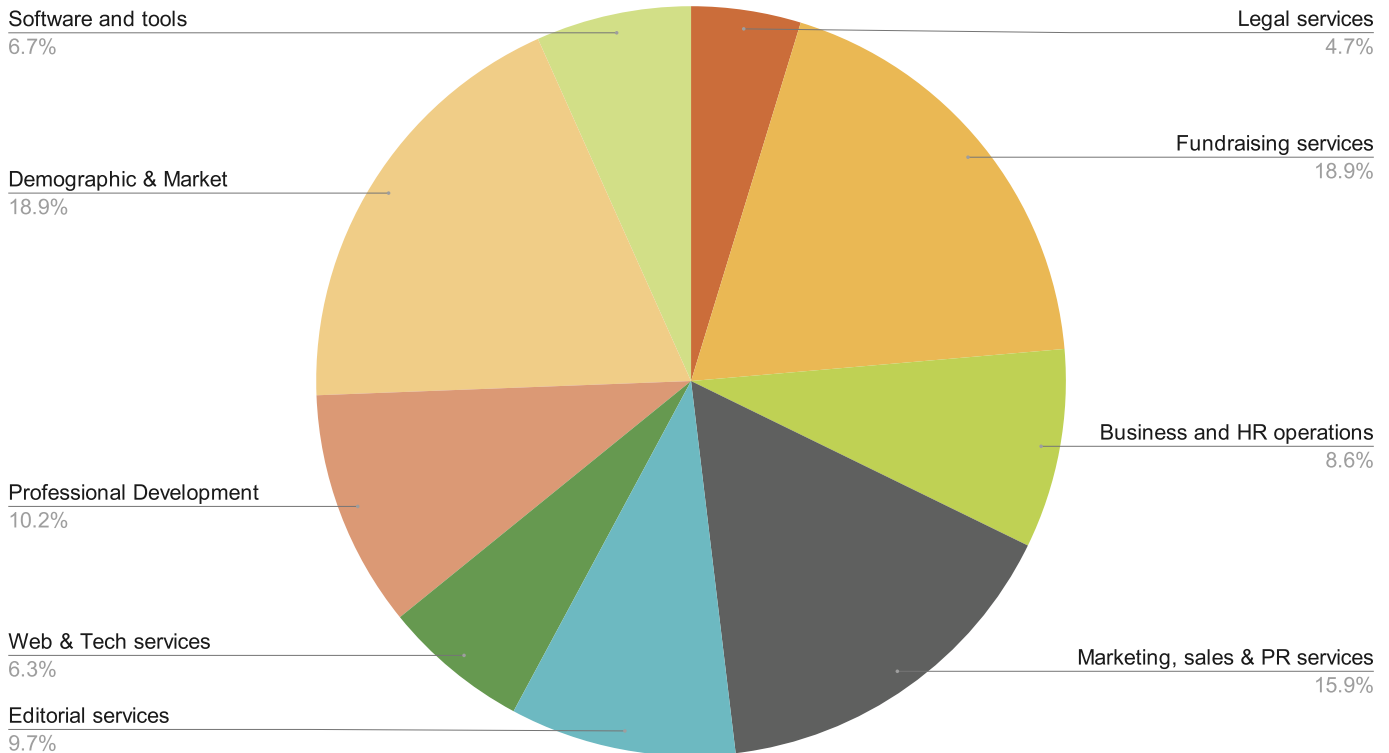


Figure 5: Organization size: \$300K-\$500K

Similar to other groups, Group C also prioritizes the need for demographic market research and fundraising as shared services. This segment marks 14.1% of the overall survey respondent pool (see figure 1). We have a total of 11 respondents within Group C.

They spend less than 1% of their budget on demographic/market research and 0% of their budget on fundraising services (see appendix figure G and H).

Marketing, sales, and public relations ranks third on their hierarchy of needs at almost 16%. Group C spends 5.64% of their budget on this category of services (see appendix figure A).

Their 12-month and 5-year plans also focus on diversifying their revenue models through the establishment and/or the strengthening of sales, marketing, and outreach.

Group C is also the highest spender—as a percentage of expenses—on editorial services among all organization sizes. They spend an average of almost 19% of their total budget on such services (see appendix figure J).

Although they expressed a relatively low need for business and HR shared services (8.6%, figure 5), it is another category of services that bears a high cost of 13% of their budget (see appendix figure D).

Revenue streams:

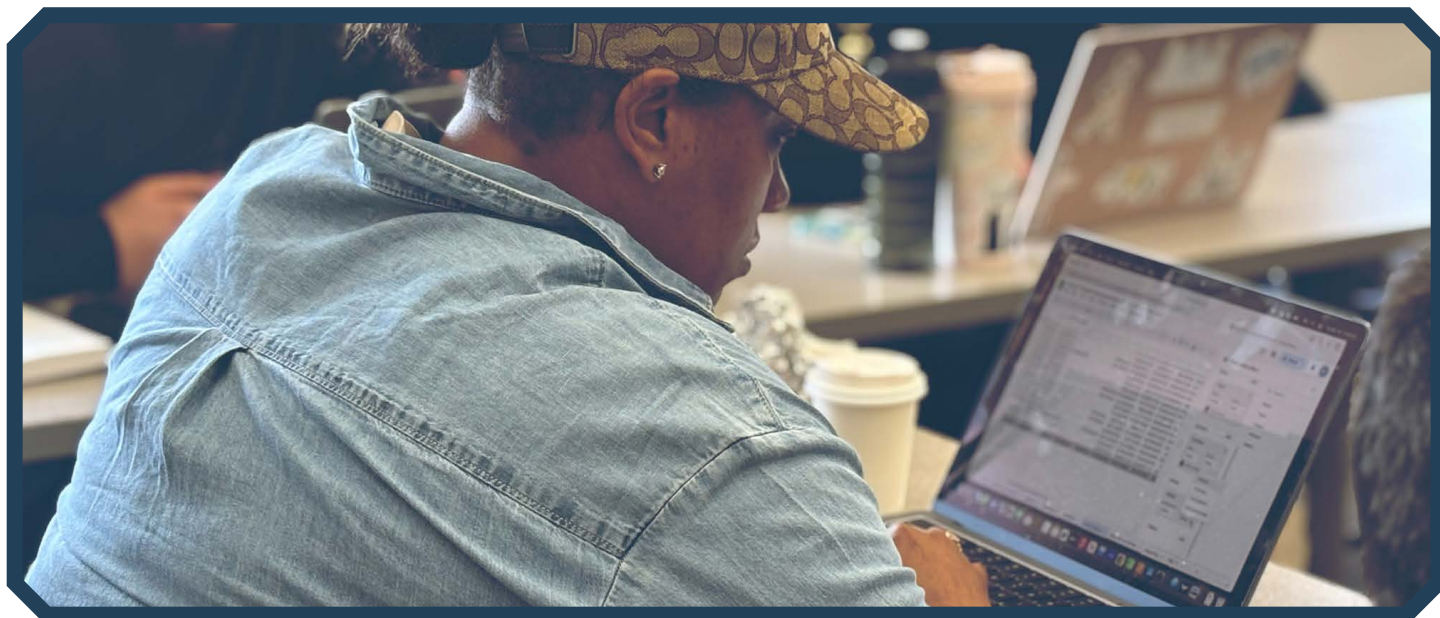
We asked our 11 respondents to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category.

REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP C:		
<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group C</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Foundation grants	6	67.8%
Advertising	6	58.7%
Sponsorships	1	45%
Ownership investments	2	35%
Other	3	21%
Events	1	15%
Donations	3	9.6%
Subscriptions	4	2.2%
Memberships	0	0%
Fundraisers	0	0%

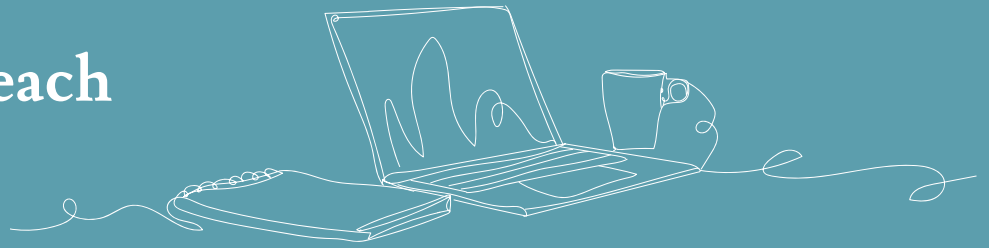
As the yearly revenue of our respondents grows, so does their reliance on foundation grants. 6 out of 11 respondents use foundation grants as a revenue stream with an average rate of 67.8% of their total revenue.

Advertising ranks second as it averages 58.7% of the revenue streams for more than half of our respondents.

Memberships and fundraisers are not represented in their yearly revenue streams.



Audience Reach



Audience Reach:

- More than half of Group C respondents have a newsletter, with a total of 36,900 unique newsletter subscribers.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP C	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
0 - 1,000	4
1,001 - 10,000	3
10,000 and up	2

- Group C respondents total 191,100 unique website visitors per month.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP C	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique website visitors</i>
0 - 1,000	4
10,000 and up	3
20,000 - 40,000	1
40,000 and up	2

- Three Group C respondents host a podcast, one of which has 20,000 unique listeners.
- Only one Group C respondent hosts a radio show, with 12,750 unique listeners.
- Group C runs on average 14,166 print products per edition and their print distribution ranges between 3,500 to 35,000 per product. There are 7 outlets in this group that produce print products.

d) Profile: Group D: \$500K-\$1M

Organization Size : \$501,000-\$1 million

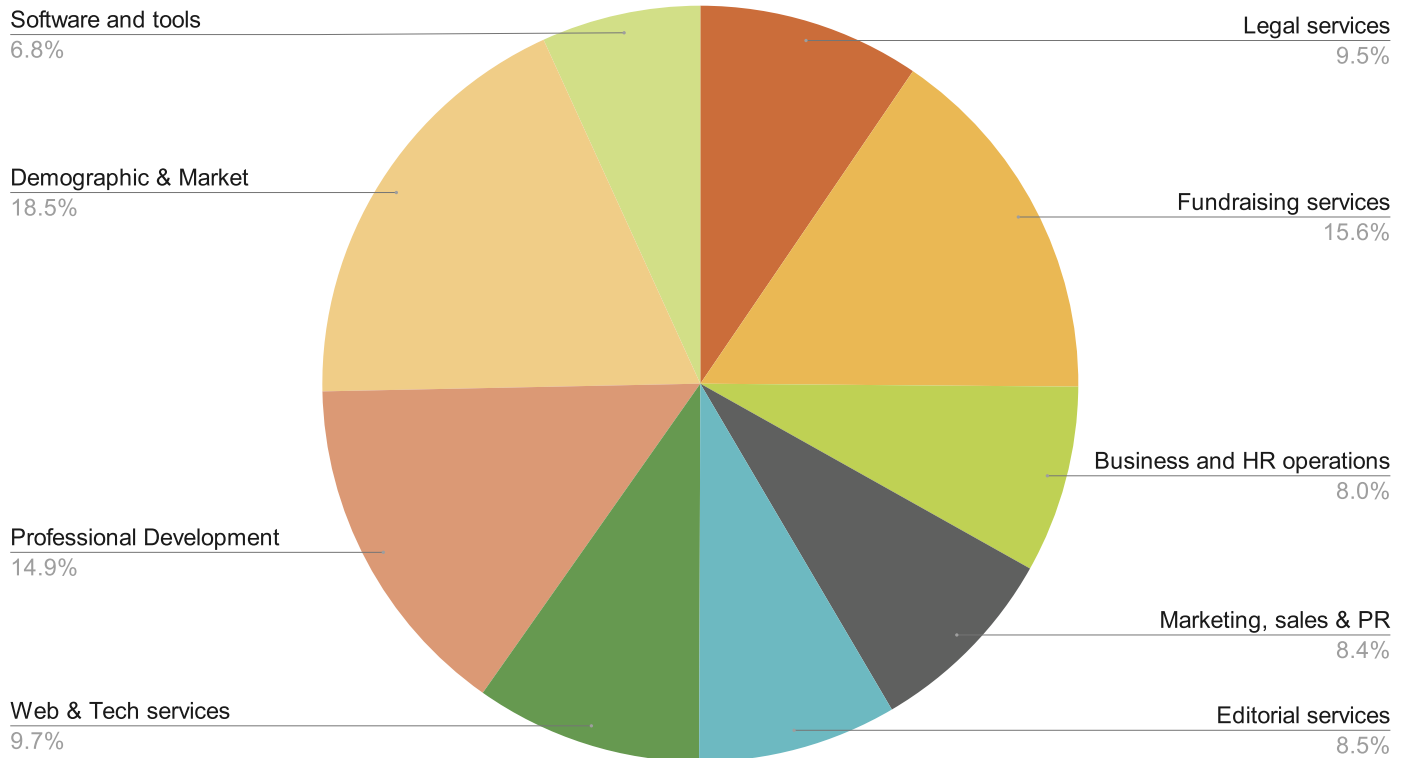


Figure 6: Organization size: \$500K-\$1M

Group D constitutes 16.7% of our respondent pool. We have a total of 13 respondents within Group D. The majority of these outlets have 6-10 full-time employees with low numbers of part-timers.

Their top shared services categories are fundraising, demographic market research, and professional development. They spend less than 1% of their budget on audience and market research and only 2% of their budget on fundraising (see appendix figure G and H).

Some 10% of respondents identified legal shared services as a priority. Although they are the top percentage spenders on legal services among all organization sizes, they only spend around 2% of their total operating budget on legal services (see appendix figure B).

Editorial services make up 8.5% of this pie chart of needs and this group of outlets is among the highest spenders on editorial services with 17.38% of their budget spent on such services (see appendix figure J).

Group D's 12-month and 5-year plans focus on diversifying and stabilizing the growth of their funding streams. They say that this would allow them to increase capacity, and consult others in the local news and/or nonprofit Chicago community.

Revenue streams:

We asked our respondents to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category. We have a total of 13 respondents within Group D.

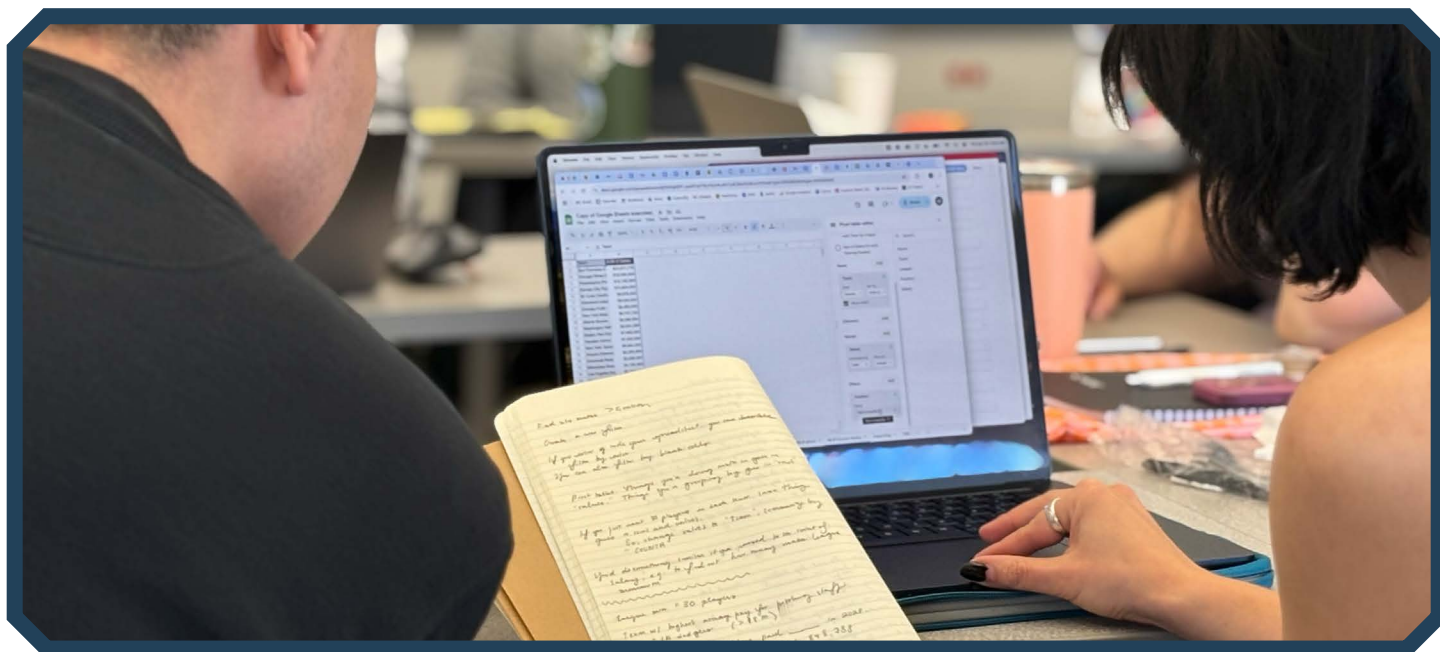
REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP D:

<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group D</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Foundation grants	6	67.8%
Advertising	6	58.7%
Sponsorships	1	45%
Ownership investments	2	35%
Other	3	21%
Events	1	15%
Donations	3	9.6%
Subscriptions	4	2.2%
Memberships	0	0%
Fundraisers	0	0%

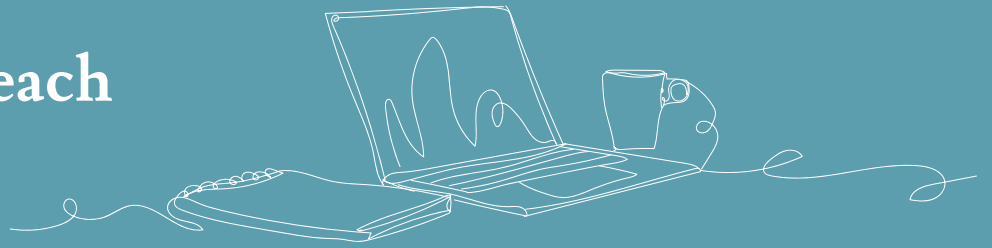
As the yearly revenue of our respondents grows, so does their reliance on foundation grants. 6 out of 11 respondents use foundation grants as a revenue stream with an average rate of 67.8% of their total revenue.

Advertising ranks second as it averages 59.66% of the revenue streams for more than half of our respondents.

Memberships and fundraisers are not represented in their yearly revenue streams.



Audience Reach



Audience Reach:

- Group D members reach a total of 125,908 unique newsletter subscribers.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP D	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
0-1,000	2
1,001-10,000	6
10,001 -20,000	3
40,000 and up	1

- Group D members who host a website total 647,158 unique visitors per month.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP D	
<i>Range of website visitors</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique website visitors</i>
0-10,000	4
10,001-50,000	1
50,001 -100,000	5
100,001 and up	2

- Only 3 Group D members have a podcast, and the only two with a significant reach have 5,000 subscribers.
- One Group D member hosts a TV show with a significant reach of 1 million viewers.
- More than half of Group D members host a YouTube channel. They average 1,681 unique subscribers.
- Group D averages 7,066 print runs per edition and their print distribution ranges between 3,000 to 10,000 per edition. There are 6 outlets in this group that produce print products.

e) Profile: Group E: \$1M-\$2.9M

\$1M-\$2.9M

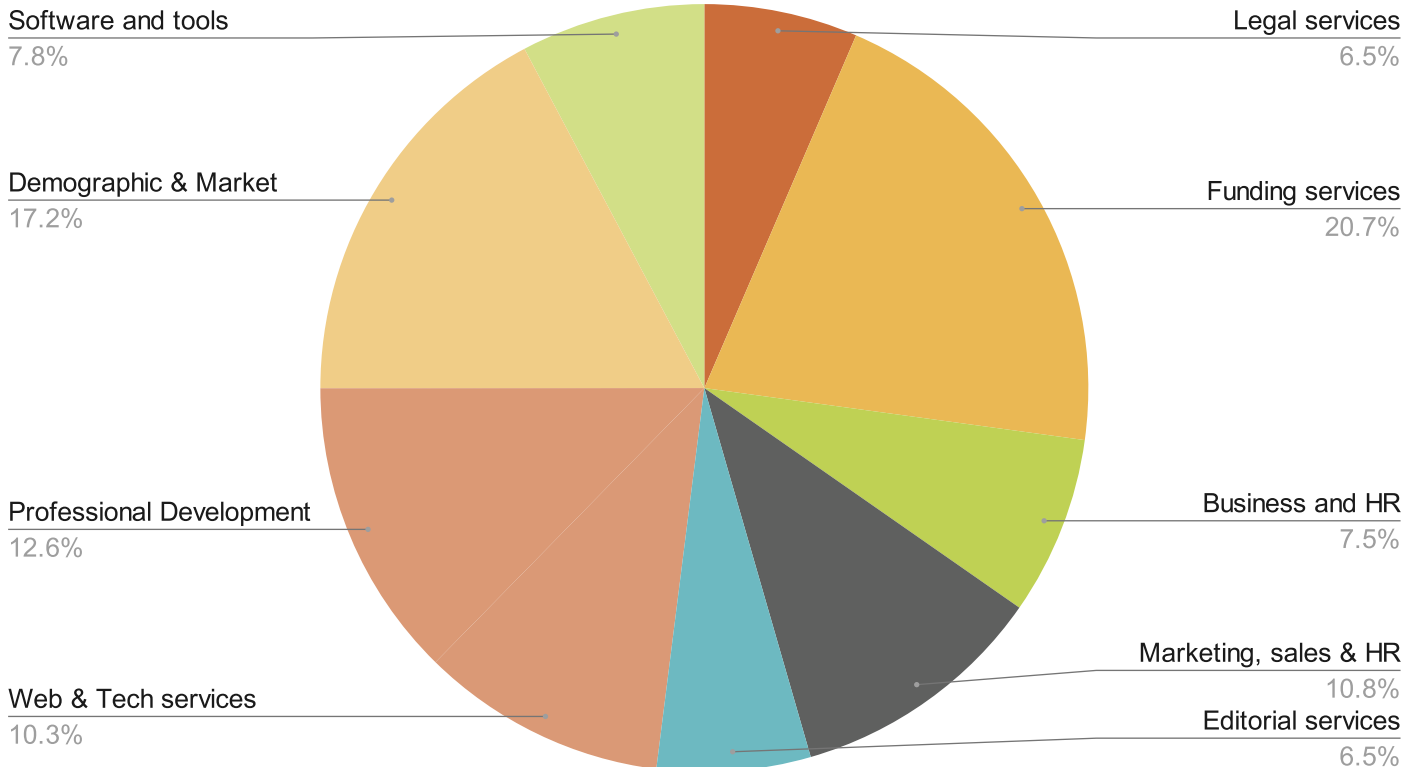


Figure 7: Organization size: \$1-\$2.9 million

Eight outlets fall under this category, making up 10.3% of our respondent population.

Group E's top shared services needs are similar to other groups: 20.7% of organizations that fall under Group E wanted fundraising services, followed by 17.2% who requested demographic and market research and 12.6% who requested professional development services. Group E spends on average 11.88% of their budget on editorial services (see appendix figure C and J). Only 6.5% of their respondents expressed interest in this service.

Demographic/market research is ranked high in their expressed service needs. And in actuality, they spend very little on this service (see appendix figure G).

This group is distinct in their confidence in their 5-year plan, as their organizations are less precarious than smaller outlets. Their plans are not reliant on creating new products but sustaining and growing the ones they already have.

Their fundraising shared services need (20.7%) shows that they are also striving for financial stability, proving that regardless of their yearly operating budget, local media organizations of all sizes have the same goal: funding opportunities and financial stability to at least maintain current operating levels.

These organizations have at least 6-10 full-time employees and more than half of them have 2-5 part-timers.

Their second-highest average spending is business and HR operations (5.88% of their budget, see appendix figure J) and they are still looking to expand capacity in this category as their priorities in the above graph shows (figure 7).

Revenue streams:

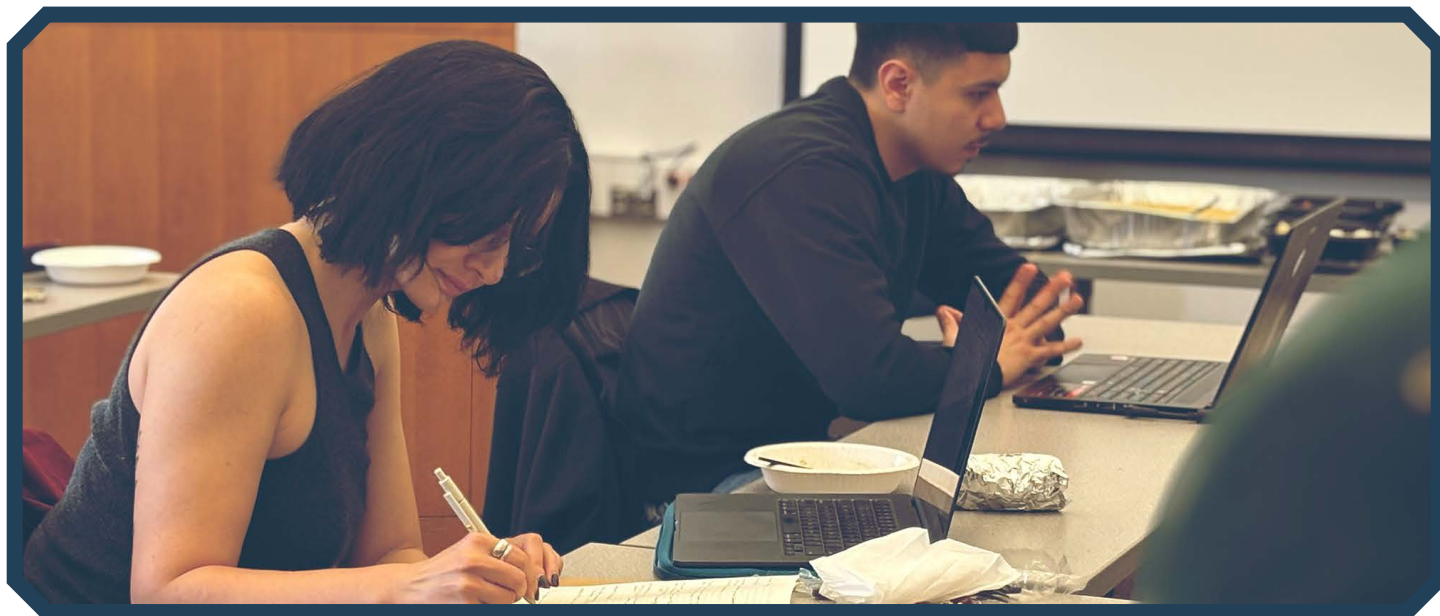
We asked our 8 respondents to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category.

REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP E:		
<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group E</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Foundation grants	8	33.6%
Sponsorships	4	33.7%
Advertising	5	29%
Events	1	20%
Donations	7	17%
Subscriptions	1	14%
Fundraisers	4	11.2%
Other	5	10.6%
Memberships	0	0%
Ownership investments	0	0%

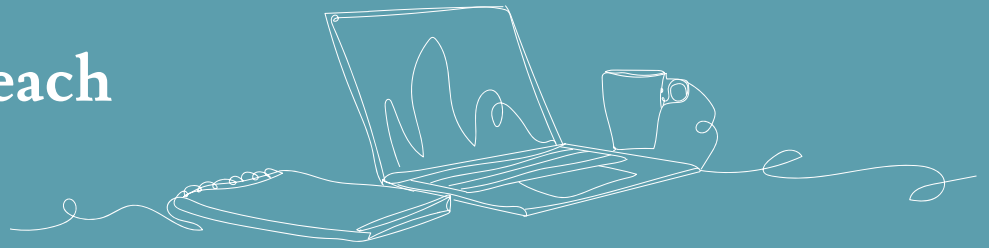
All group E respondents rely on foundation grants, and 7 out of 8 rely on donations.

Half of the outlets in Group E use sponsorship and advertising. These two revenue streams make on average a third of their total revenue.

None of them use memberships or ownership investments. Ownership investments are incompatible with the nonprofit model that almost all of them have chosen to adopt (see figure 2).



Audience Reach



Audience Reach:

- Almost all respondents in Group E have newsletters, with a total of 81,784 unique subscribers.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP E	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
0 - 10,000	4
10,001 - 50,000	3

- This group totals 241,650 unique website visitors per month.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP E	
<i>Range of website visitors</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique website visitors</i>
0 - 10,000	4
10,001 - 50,000	2
50,001 - 100,000	1
100,001 and up	1

- Only two members in Group E have podcasts. The only platform with relevant reach has 50,000 unique listeners
- 3 members in Group E have a YouTube channel, with an average of 945 unique subscribers.
- Group E averages 2,142 print runs per edition and their print distribution ranges between 500 to 3,785 per edition. There are 3 outlets in this group that produce print products.

f) Profile: Group F: \$3M+

Organization Size : \$3M+

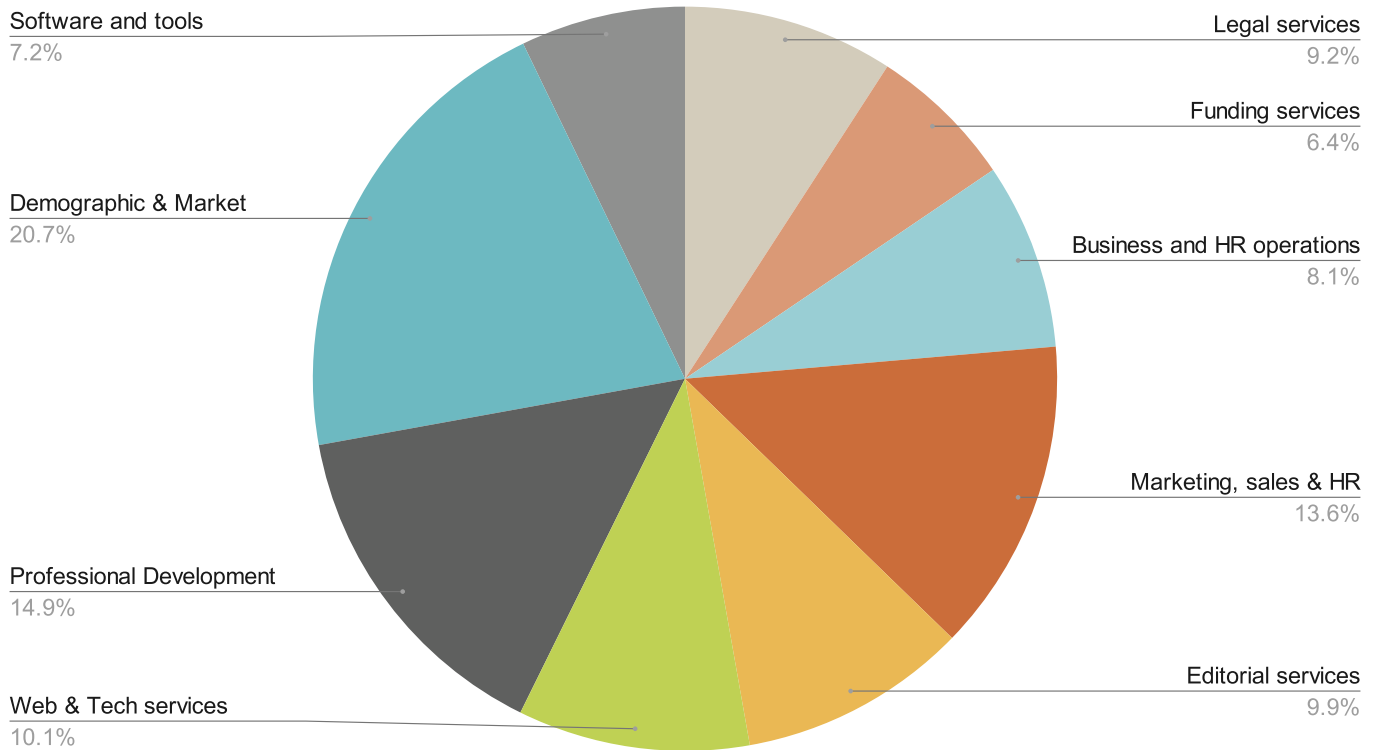


Figure 8: Organization size: \$3 million+

We have a total of 8 respondents within Group F, representing 10.3% of our pool of respondents. They are the only group with a low need for fundraising shared services.

They have the highest need among all groups for demographic and market research (see figure in general overview section iii), and they are also the biggest spenders on this category (see appendix figure G).

They are the group that is most interested in professional development (see figure 9)—a service that they spend less than 1% of their budget on (see appendix figure F). Group F does not rely heavily on part-time employees. They generally have at least 21 full timers. The most affluent members in Group F have more than 30 full-time employees.

Although these organizations are still invested in finding sustainable revenue streams, their plans for the next 12 months to 5 years rely on strategic planning for their editorial and content production process, newsroom operations, and audience growth and engagement.

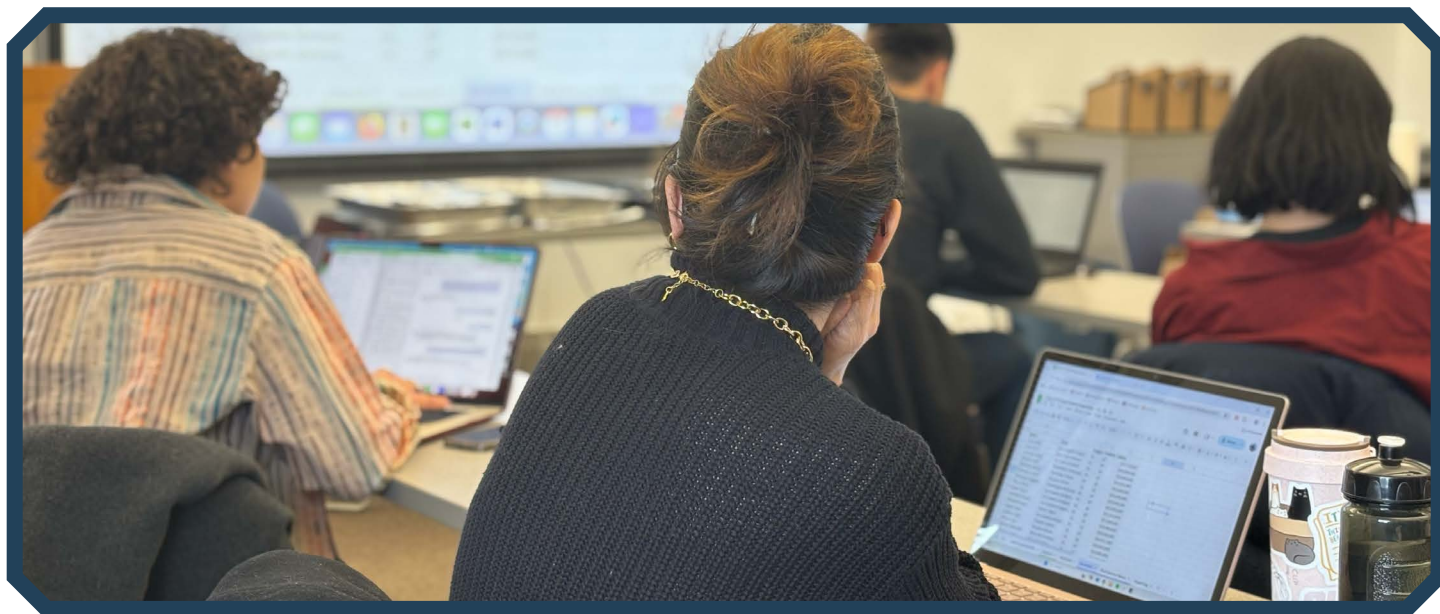
Revenue streams:

We asked our 8 respondents to list the approximate percentages of revenue streams in the past year for each category.

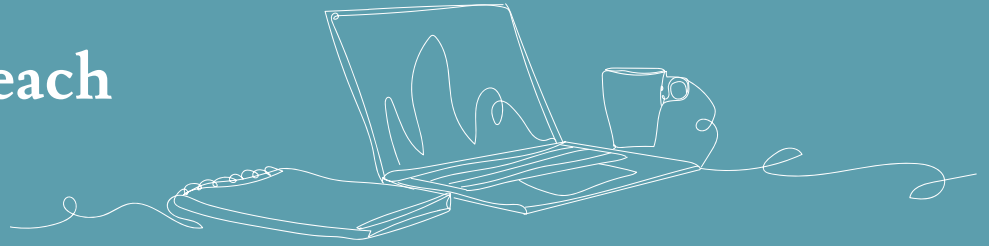
REVENUE STREAMS IN GROUP F:		
<i>Revenue stream category</i>	<i>Number of newsrooms that use each category as a revenue stream within Group E</i>	<i>Average percentage of this revenue stream for the outlets that use this revenue stream</i>
Foundation grants	8	47%
Other	4	30%
Subscriptions	3	17.6%
Advertising	4	15.7%
Sponsorships	4	12.2%
Donations	8	12.4%
Memberships	5	5.8%
Events	3	2.3%
Ownership investments	1	2%
Fundraisers	2	1.5%

All respondents in Group F heavily rely on foundation grants, with an average of 47% of their revenue stream. Grants make up 80% of the revenue stream for two outlets in Group F.

Donations are also considered an important part of their streams, because all of Group F uses it, but they make up only 12% of their total revenue.



Audience Reach



Audience Reach:

- All group F respondents have a newsletter. Combined, they serve 1,165,670 unique newsletter subscribers.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP F	
<i>Range of subscribers</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
Under 24,999	2
25,000 - 49,999	2
50,000 - 99,999	1
100,000 - 700,000	2
700,000 and above	1

- Group F serves 2,604,170 total website visitors per month.

AUDIENCE REACH GROUP F	
<i>Range of unique website visitors</i>	<i>Count of outlets that have that range of unique subscribers on their newsletter</i>
1,000,000 and above	1
100,000 - 999,000	2
Under 100,000	3

- Only one member in Group F has a broadcast TV show, with an average of 6 million unique viewers.
- Group F respondents who host a YouTube channel have on average 27,210 unique subscribers.
- Only two respondents in Group F produce print products. One of them runs around 140,000 products daily and the other runs half of that sum weekly.

iv. Media types: Print, audio, and video analysis

a) Organizations that produce print products, in conjunction with other mediums:

Yearly revenue of outlets that produce print products

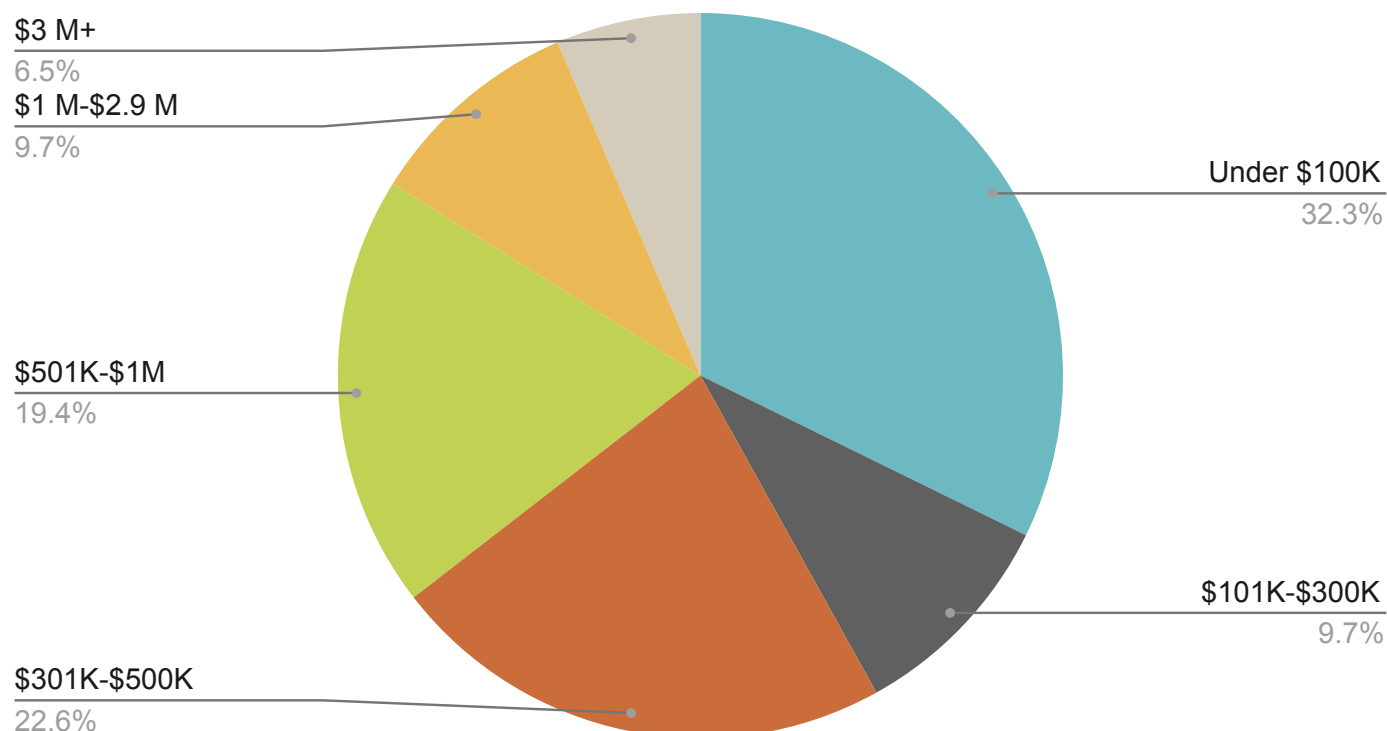


Figure 9: Yearly revenue of organizations that produce print products

- Almost 40% of our respondents produce print products. 65% of outlets that produce print stories also produce audio stories.
- 26 of 31 respondents producing print products operate with budgets below \$1M a year.

Subcategories: Ranked

For those with print products, these were their ranked needs:

Ranked #1: Advertising sales

Ranked #2: Audience growth

Ranked #3: Fundraising support

Ranked #4: Demographic/market research

Ranked #5: Grant writing

Ranked #6: Training of staff

Ranked #7: Print distribution

Ranked #8: Marketing services

Ranked #9: Intellectual property

Ranked #10: Webmaster support

b) Organizations that produce audio products, in conjunction with other mediums:

Yearly revenue of outlets that produce audio stories (radio or podcast)

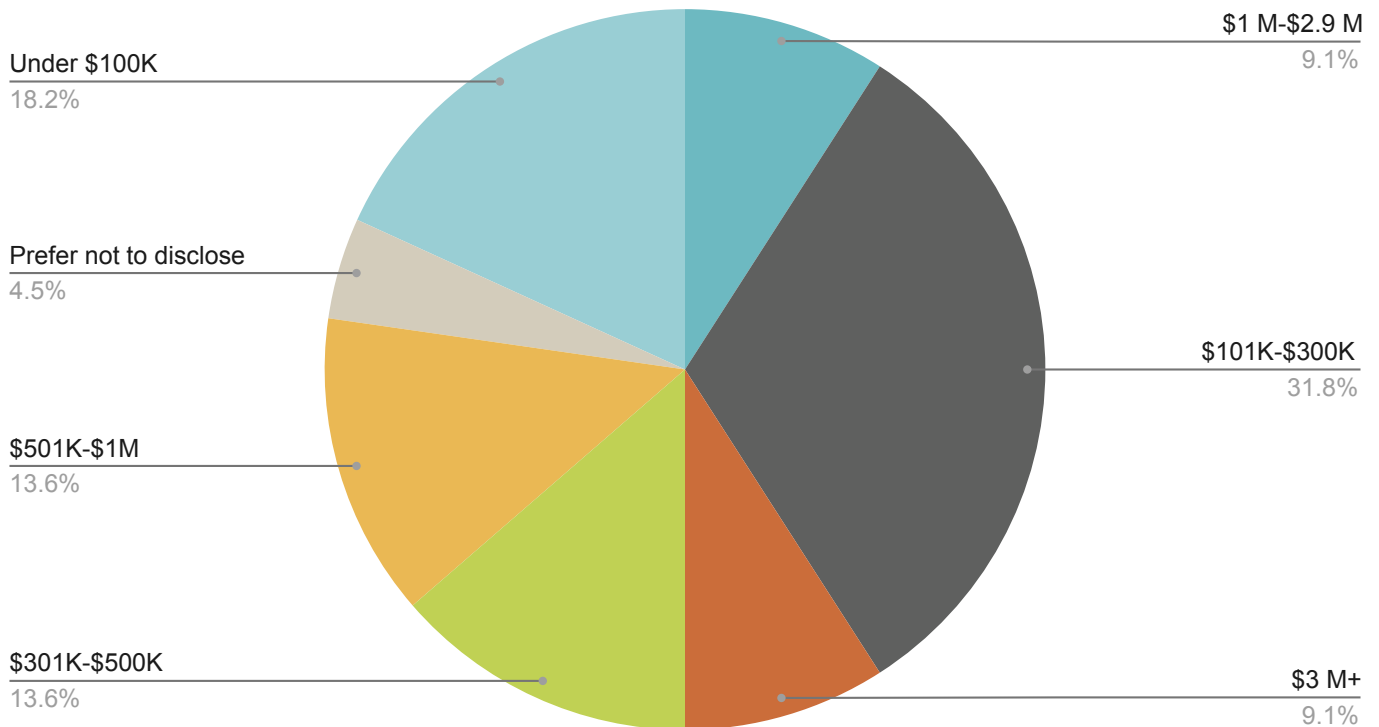


Figure 10: Yearly revenue of outlets that produce audio stories

- 28% of our respondents produce audio stories. All of the respondents who produce audio stories also have a website and/or a newsletter. Together, these outlets reach a total of a million and a half listeners via their audio stories.
- 50% of organizations that use audio as a medium for storytelling operate with a budget below \$300K.

Subcategories: Ranked

For those with audio products, these were their ranked needs:

Ranked #1: Audience growth

Ranked #2: Demographic/market research

Ranked #3: Fundraising support

Ranked #4: Advertising sales

Ranked #5: Grant writing

Ranked #6: Public Relations

Ranked #7: Marketing services

Ranked #8: Training of staff

Ranked #9: Content analytics

Ranked #10: Web upgrade

iv. Language diversity

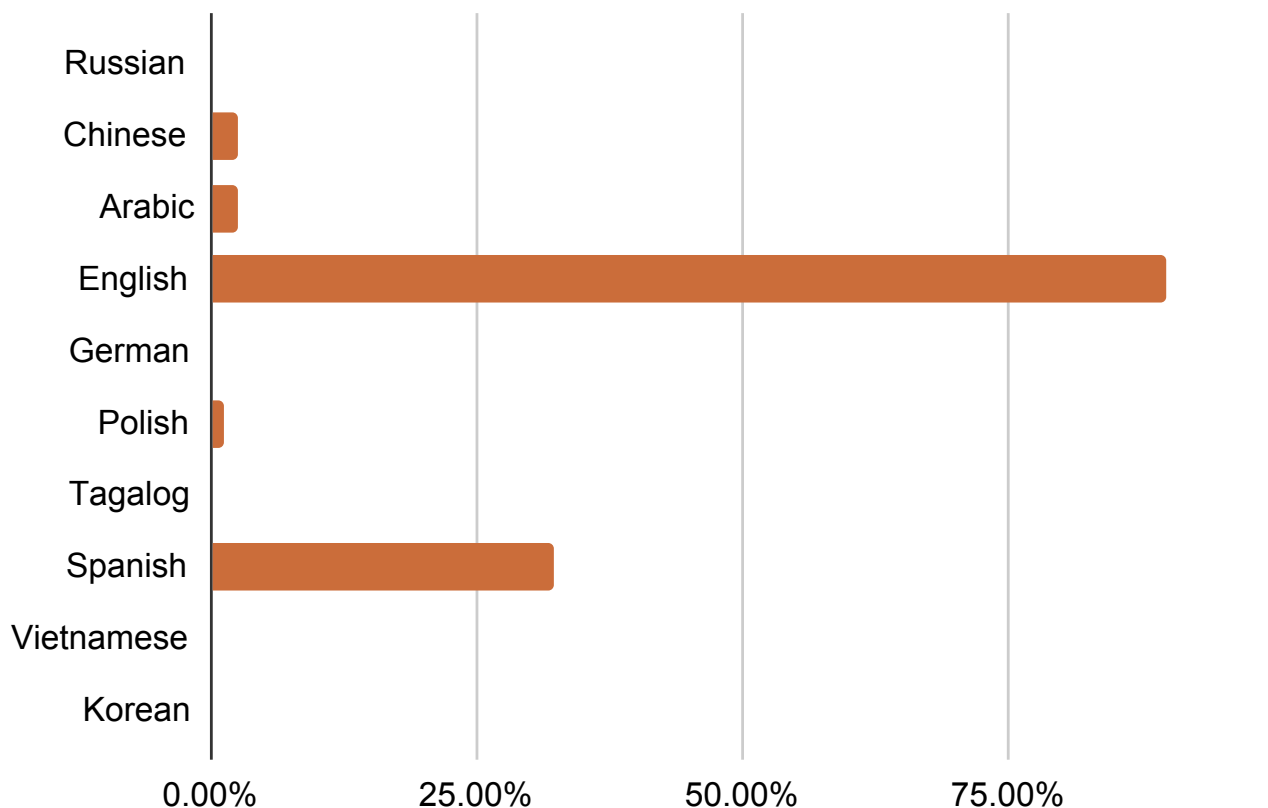


Figure 12: Language diversity in local community media production based on survey response. Scale is in percentage.

Highlights:

- Almost 90% of respondents publish their content in English.
- 32.05% of respondents publish some of their content in Spanish. This number overlaps with English publishers. Only two of respondents exclusively publish their work in Spanish.
- 2.56% of respondents publish their work in Arabic.
- 1.28% of respondents publish their stories in Polish.
- 2.56% of respondents publish their work in Chinese.

2020 Census data shows that 35.5% of Chicago residents speak languages other than English at home, signaling comfortability with non-English media. The 2021 American Community survey results show that in Chicago, more than 40,000 people spoke Chinese or Polish at home.

iv. Interest in peer-to-peer learning, joint editorial projects, collaborative fundraising, and shared services

Current status: usage of shared services within the ecosystem

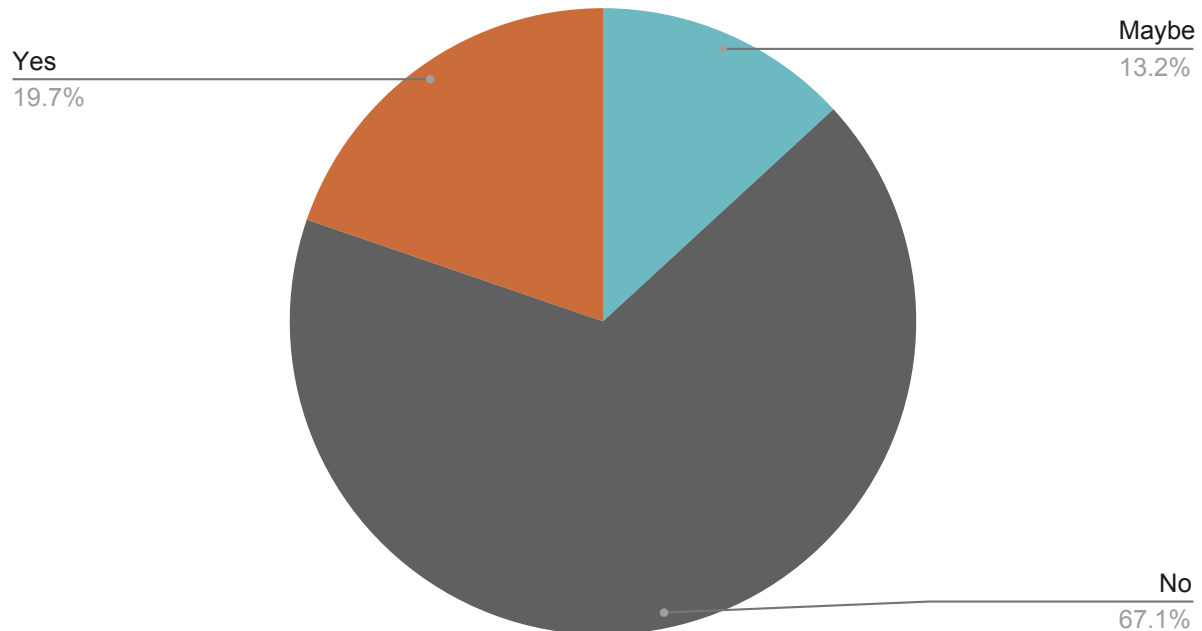


Figure 13: Current usage of shared services in the Chicago-area local media ecosystem.

Gauging interest: Are you interested in joint editorial projects with other media, if grant funding is available?

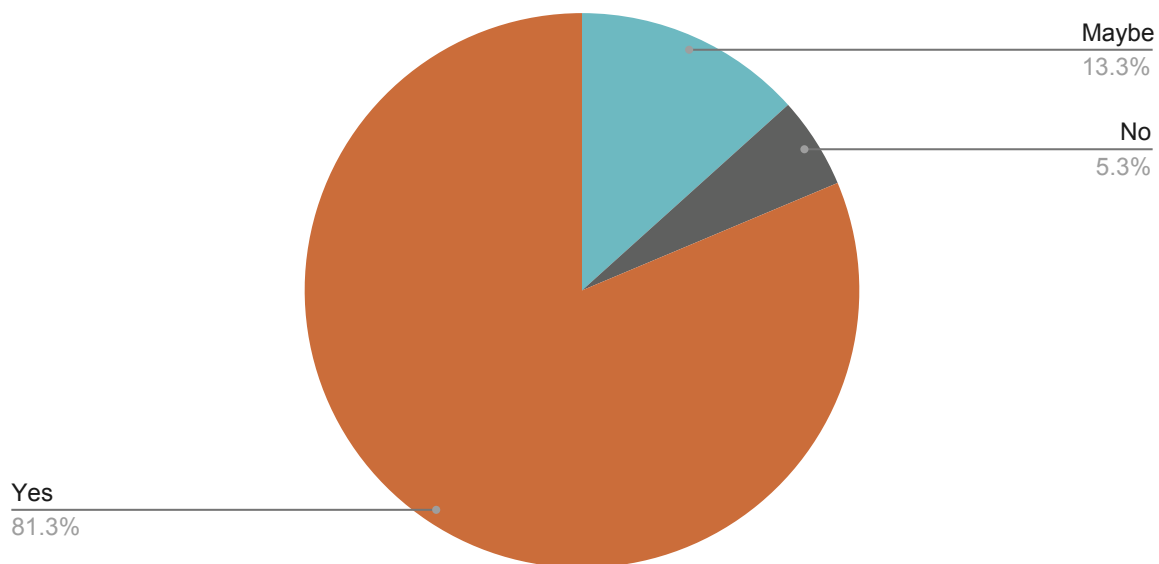


Figure 14: Gauging interest in joint editorial projects.

Highlight: 81.3% of our respondents are interested in joint editorial projects. This participation depends on numerous factors, including support for capacity to do this work.

Would you like to participate in joint fundraising with other local media?

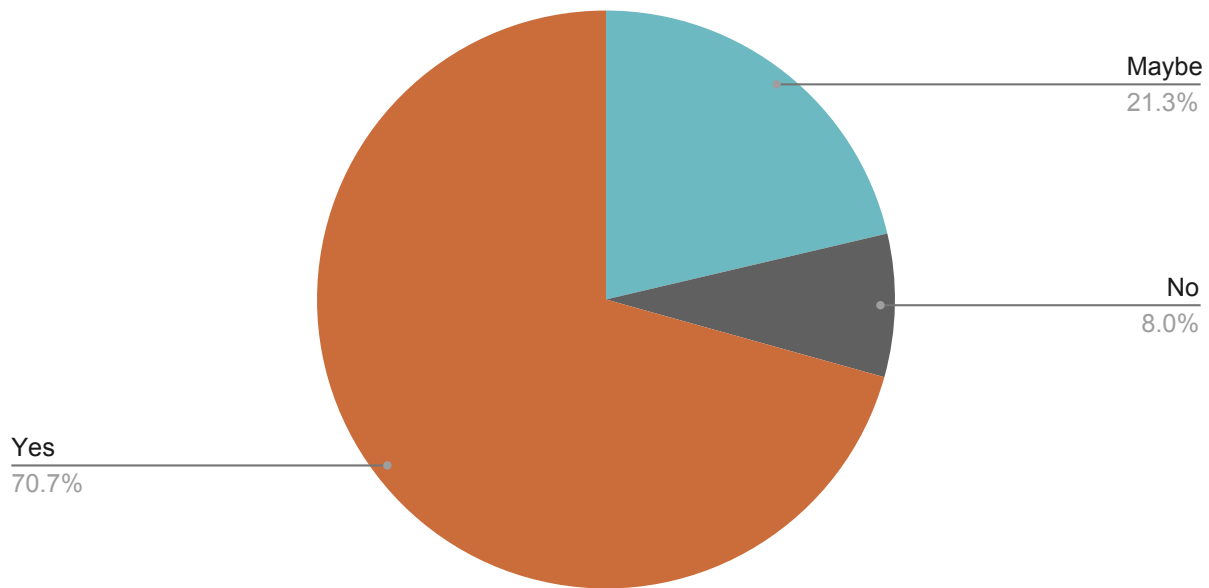


Figure 15: Possibility of participating in joint fundraising efforts

Highlight: Almost 71% of respondents are interested in joint fundraising with other media, a great indication of potential collaboration.

Would you like to participate in peer-to-peer learning opportunities?

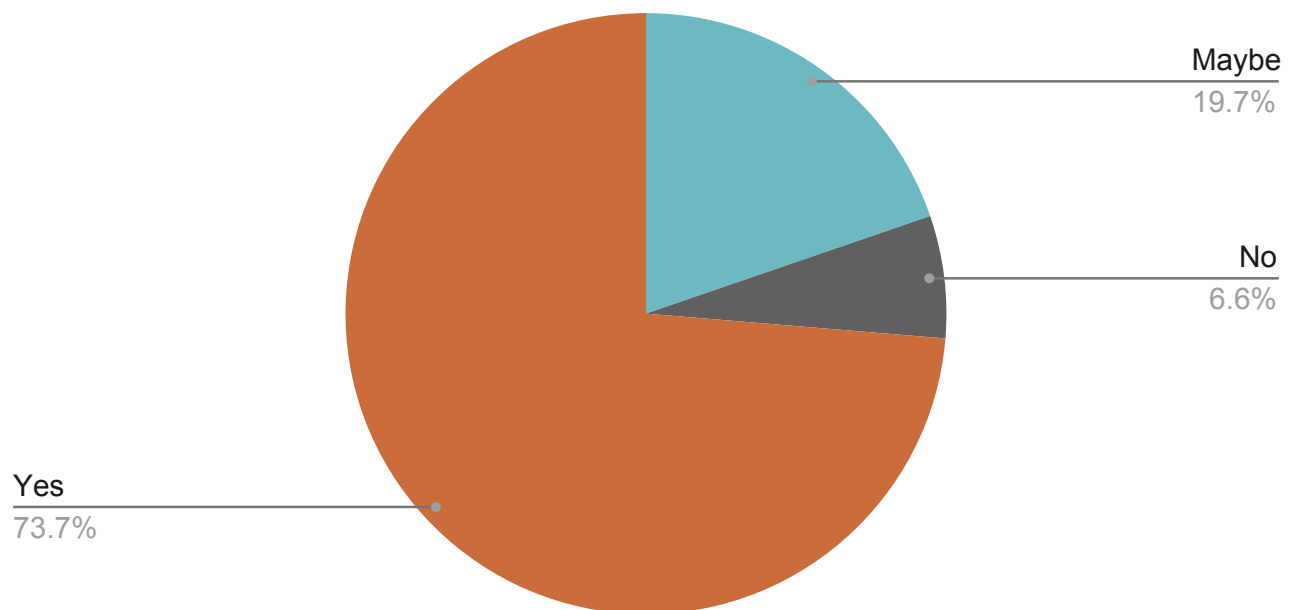


Figure 16: Possibility of participating in peer learning activities

Highlight: Almost 74% of respondents are interested in peer-to-peer learning. This is an opportunity to share skills and knowledge among media professionals in the Chicago area.

III. Peer Learning Community

In an effort to get more quantitative and qualitative information about the need for support in the Chicago-area local media ecosystem, the first round of Press Forward Chicago grantees are part of a cohort called the Peer Learning Community (“PLC”). The Chicago Community Trust, where Press Forward Chicago is based, selected Northwestern University’s Medill School to lead the PLC and set up peer-to-peer learning opportunities for the 13 grant recipients.

The relationships, trust, and shared skill sets that come out of the program will have a lasting impact and will surpass the initial dollar investments made in this grant (\$1.6 million evenly divided among the 13, over two years). This cohort has the potential to make a sustained impact that reverberates throughout the city and its suburbs.

The design for the survey documented in this report was assisted by multiple discussions held with the PLC members. The quantitative results from this survey have also been corroborated by the grantees. While the peer learning community is just halfway completed, the needs documented from this group mirror the overall results of the shared services survey.



IV. Conclusion



This first-of-its-kind survey will help Press Forward Chicago set funding priorities in the coming grant cycles. We will draw upon qualitative information gained from our inaugural 13 grantees, who comprise a Peer Learning Community (“PLC”) cohort led by Northwestern University’s Medill School. We will also conduct focus groups and one-on-one meetings to tease out next steps for shared services.

There will be supports that we will provide both to help save costs and increase the quality of the services accessible to media outlets. By pooling resources, outlets can get access to better quality and more consistent services. In addition, by showing a return on investment across these supports, eventually the subsidy can have an off-ramp, as fee-for-service models show value. To give an example: If we subsidize a grant-writing company for 20 outlets for two years, and show a strong return on investment, we can ramp down on the subsidy and move the outlets to paying for this joint service together.

This survey conveyed that the most pressing category for shared services—among outlets of all sizes, business types and yearly operating budgets—is audience demographic and market research. This is something that can be done on a large scale as a one-time expense to level-set all participating outlets. This will help them better know and serve their audiences, and also help them in explaining their reach to funders and advertisers. Outlets with operating budgets under \$3 million also prioritize funding and fundraising shared services. Priorities for additional shared services are consistent across all groupings.

Most of the ecosystem operates with a budget below \$1 million. Common revenue streams across all outlets are advertising, foundation grants, and donations. This may be perceived as a precarious state for Chicago’s local news ecosystem. But it also presents a great opportunity to create collaborations on the revenue side—joint advertising and fundraising, for example.

Although 55% of the ecosystem functions in a for-profit model, 15 out of 16 surveyed newsrooms that operate with budgets above \$1 million are nonprofits. The larger organizations have a stronger reliance on this nonprofit model, but diversification of funding sources is still key, no matter the tax status.

Press Forward Chicago will balance several factors in making funding decisions, including the assessment of needs portrayed in this overview, and the average percentage of the budget spent on these services. It is worth emphasizing that some services are one-time costs whereas others are ongoing.

V. Appendix

We asked respondents to estimate the percentage of their budget that is spent on each of the major categories. This analysis will be referred to throughout section

i. Average percent of budget spent on shared services categories per outlet size

Average % of budget spent on Marketing, Sales and PR services per organization size

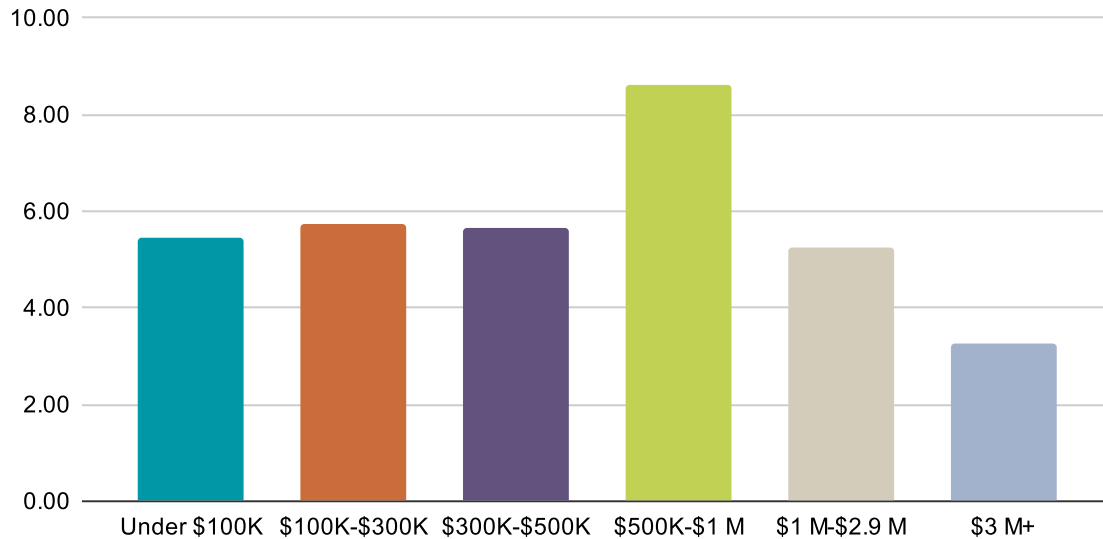


Figure A: Average % of budget spent on marketing, sales and PR, per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Legal services per organization size

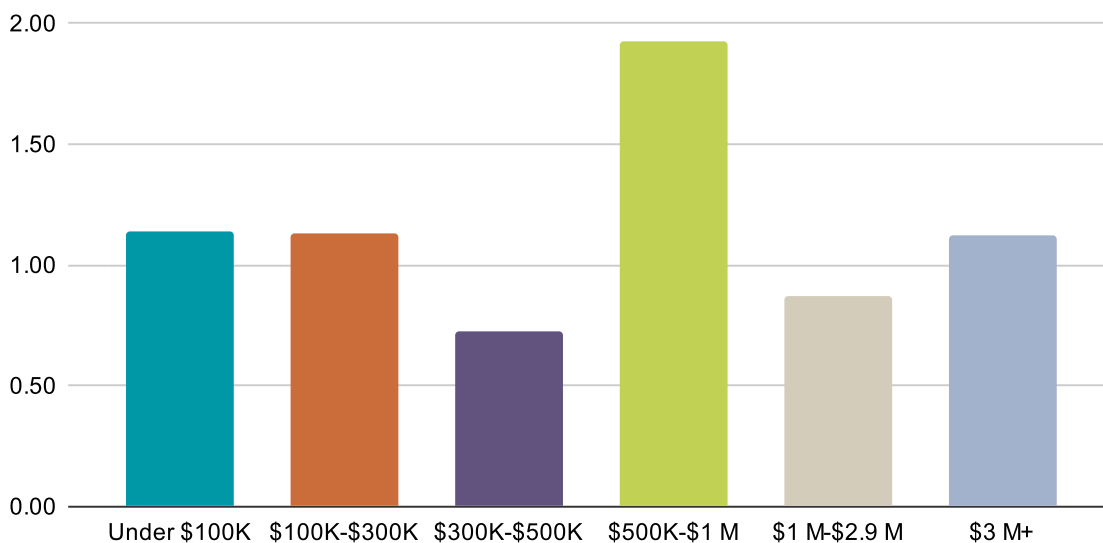


Figure B: Average % of budget spent on legal services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Editorial services per organization size

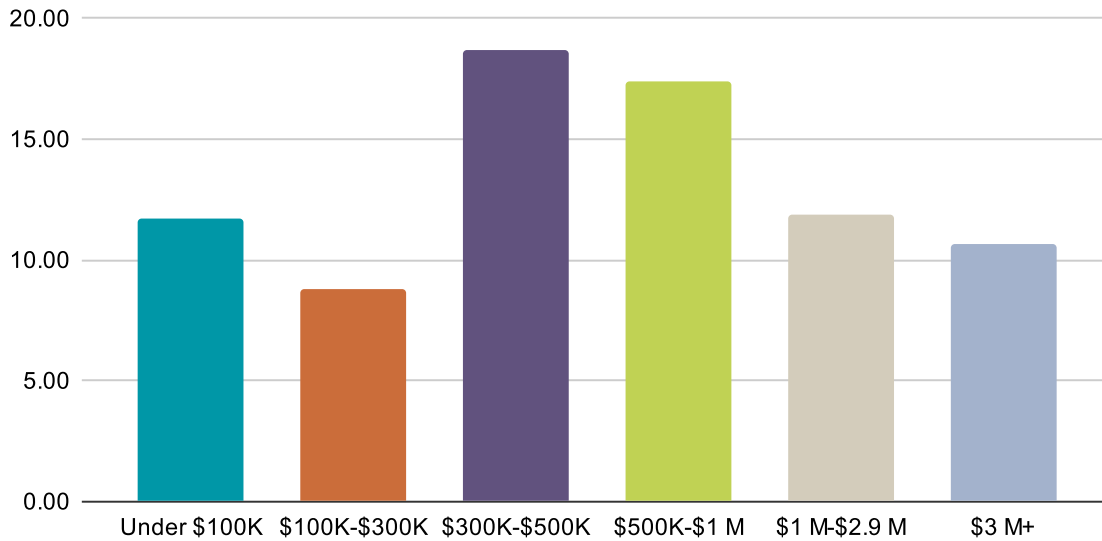


Figure C: Average % of budget spent on editorial services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Business and HR operations services per organization size

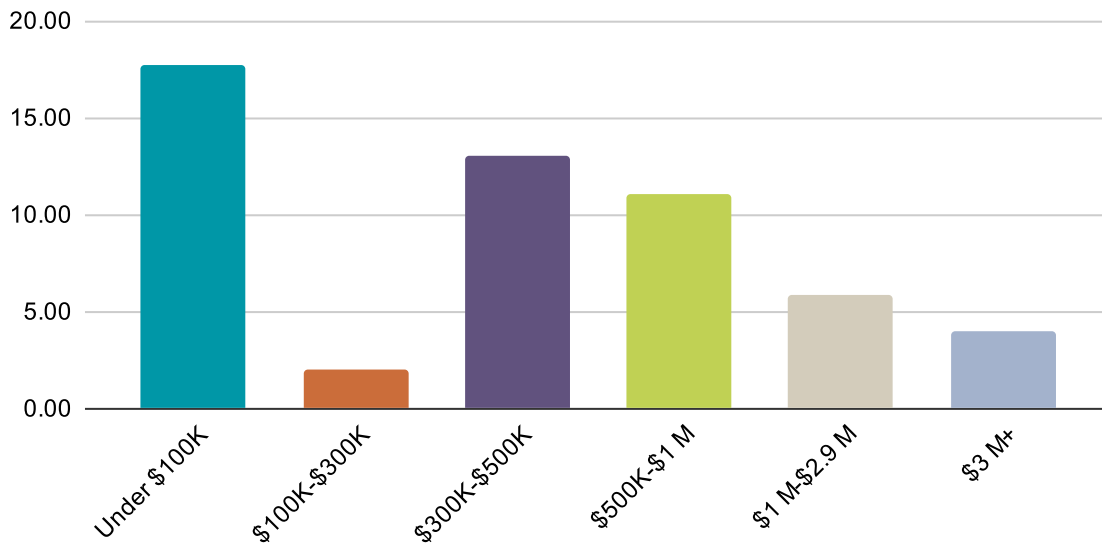


Figure D: Average % of budget spent on business and HR operations services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Web and Tech support services per organization size

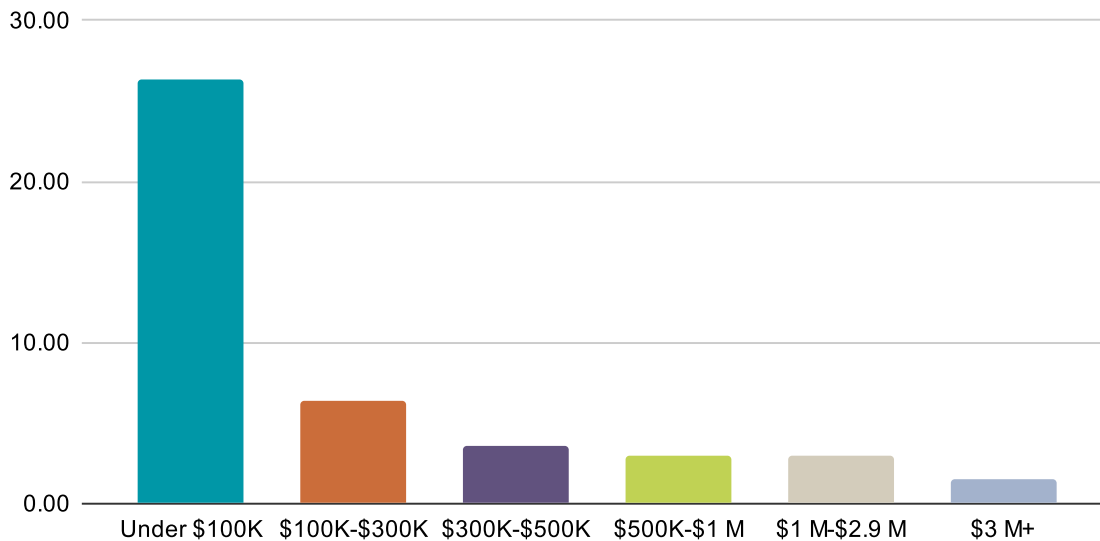


Figure E: Average % of budget spent on web and tech support services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Professional development services per organization size

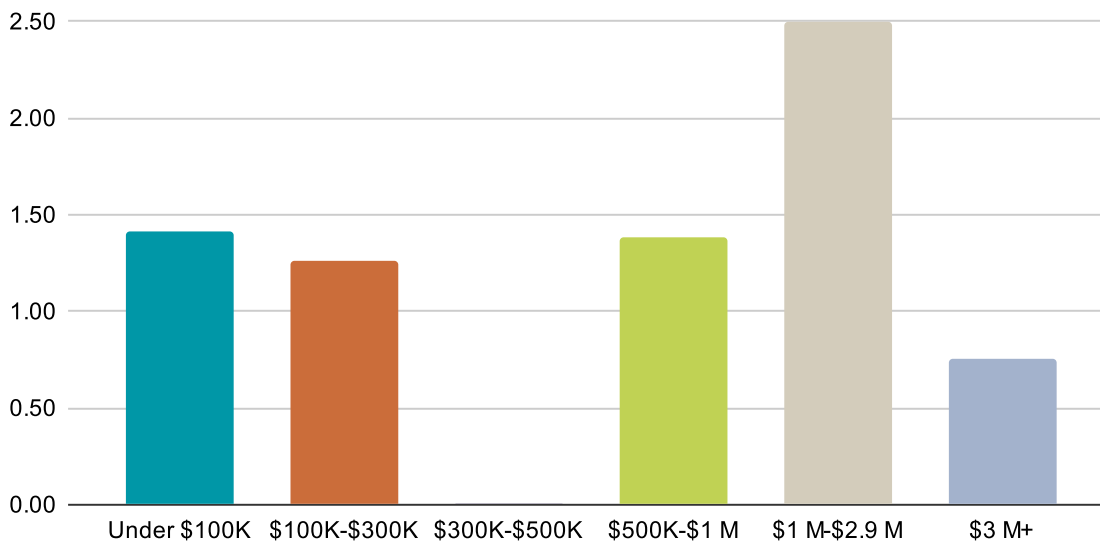


Figure F: Average % of budget spent on professional development services per organization size.

Average % of budget spent on Audience and Market research services per organization size

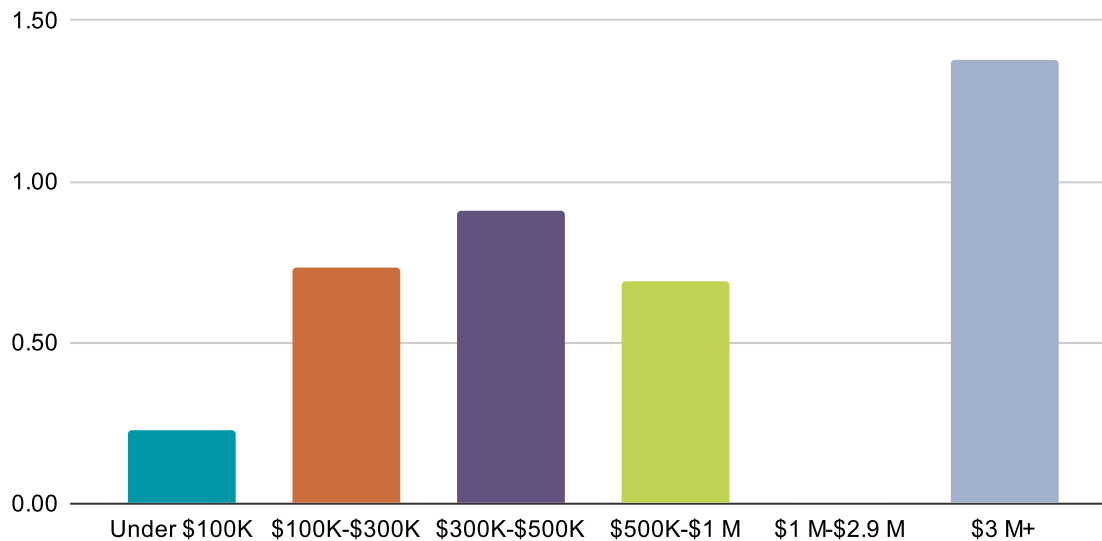


Figure G: Average % of budget spent on audience and market research services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Fundraising services per organization size

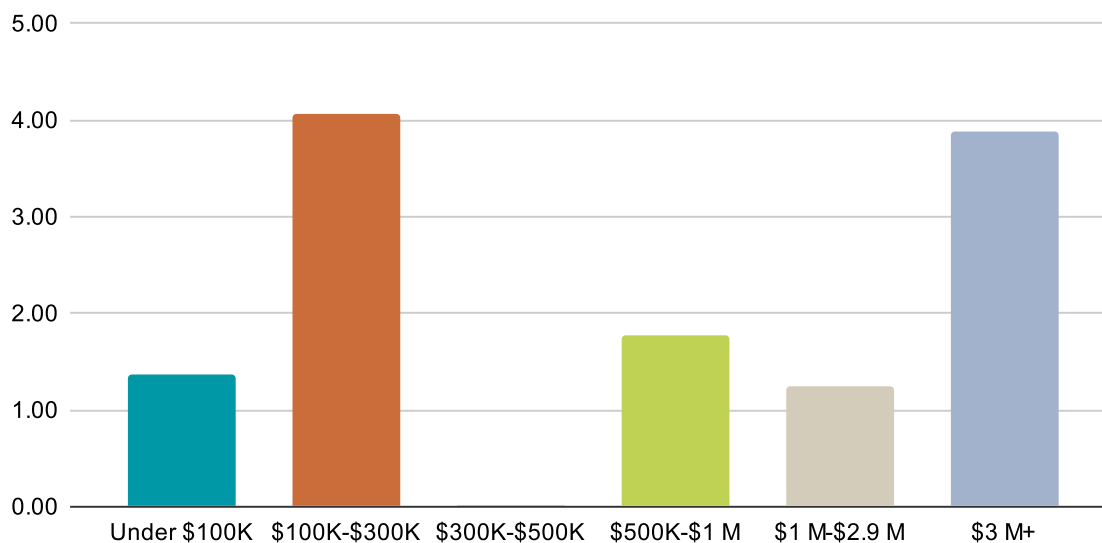


Figure H: Average % of budget spent on fundraising services per organization size

Average % of budget spent on Software and Tools per organization size

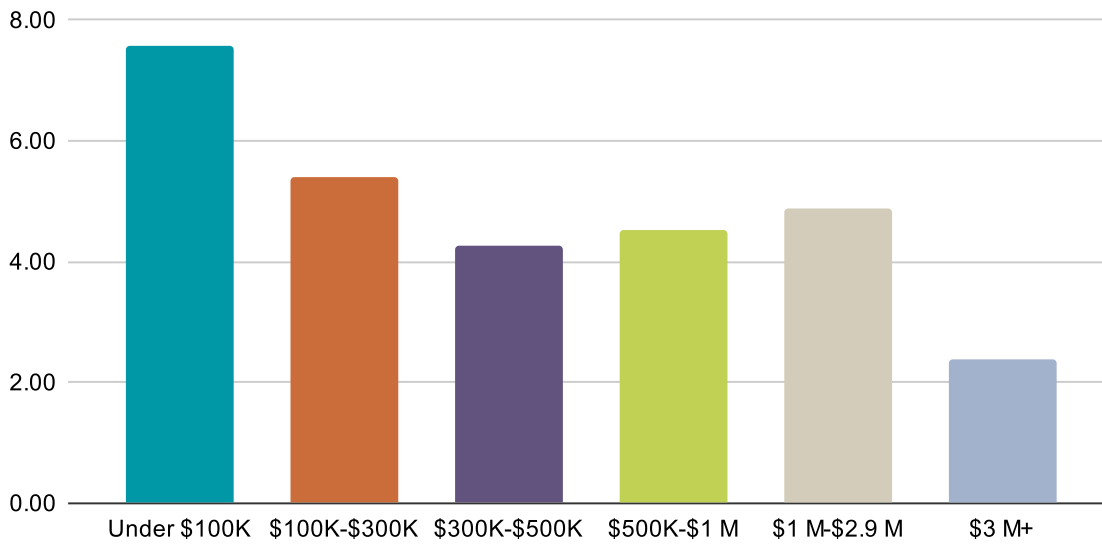


Figure I: Average % of budget spent on software and tools per organization size



Overview : Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Organization Size

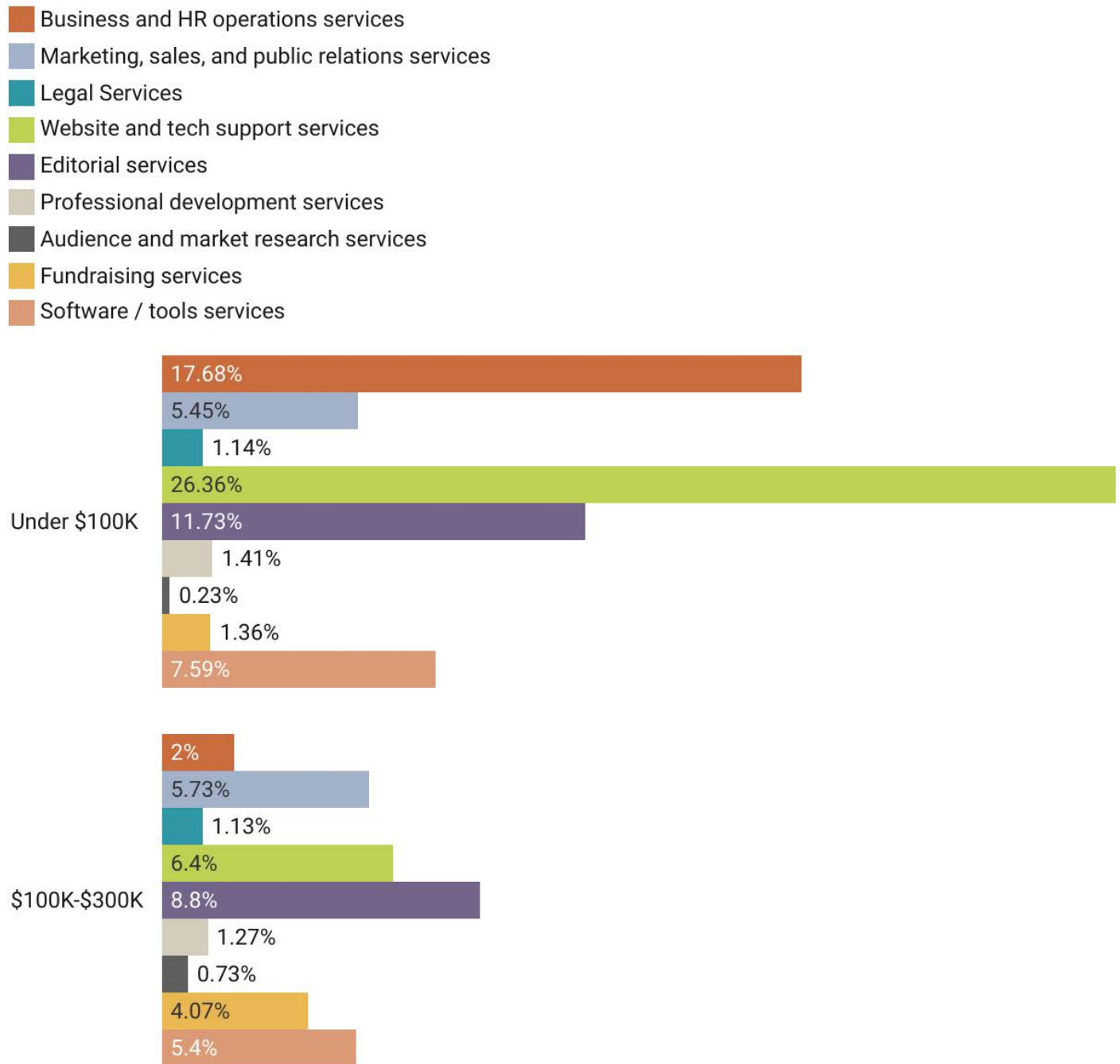
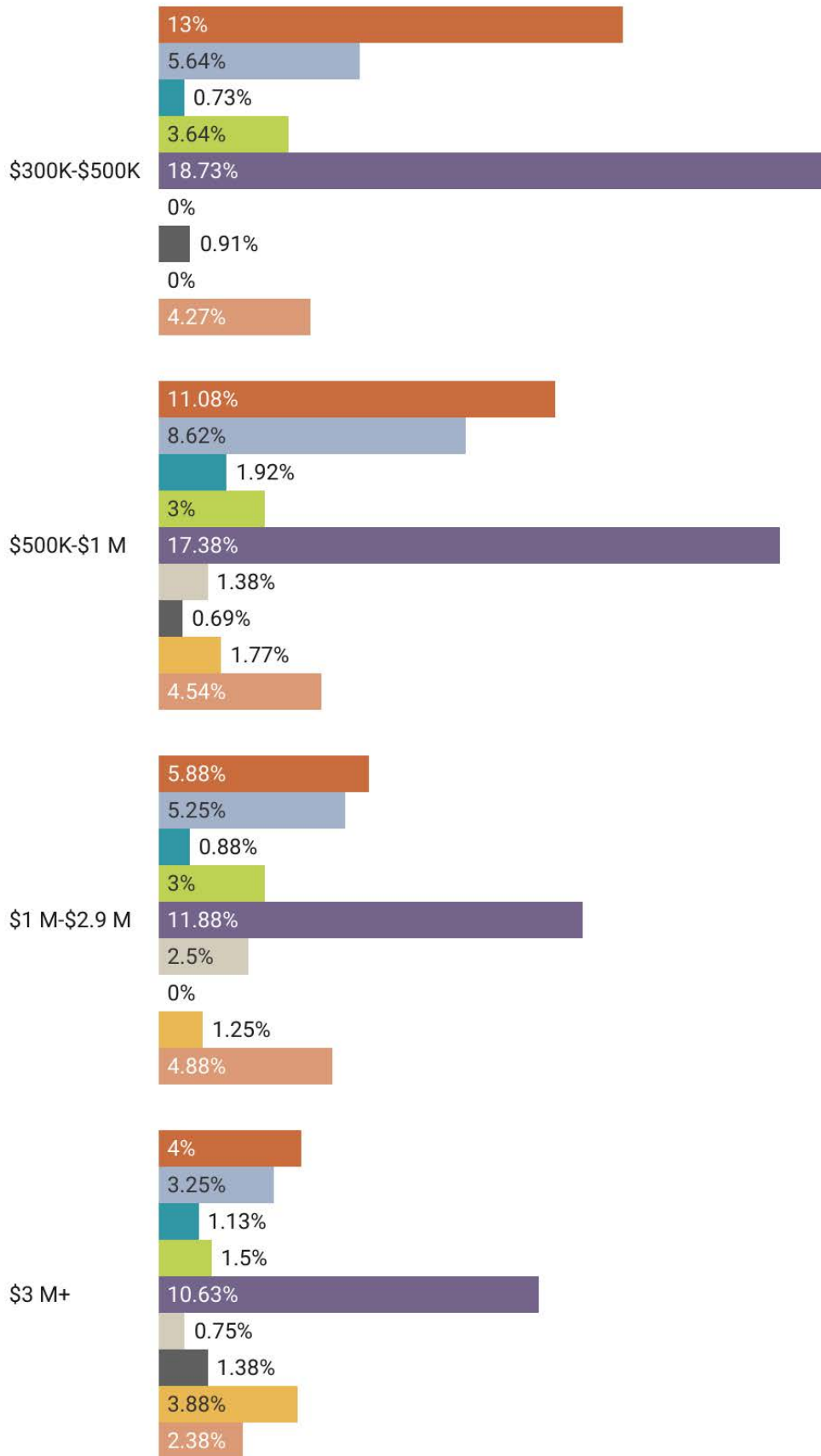


Figure J: Overview: Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Organization Size *(continued on next page)*



Created with Datawrapper

Figure J: Overview: Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Organization Size

Overview : Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Category

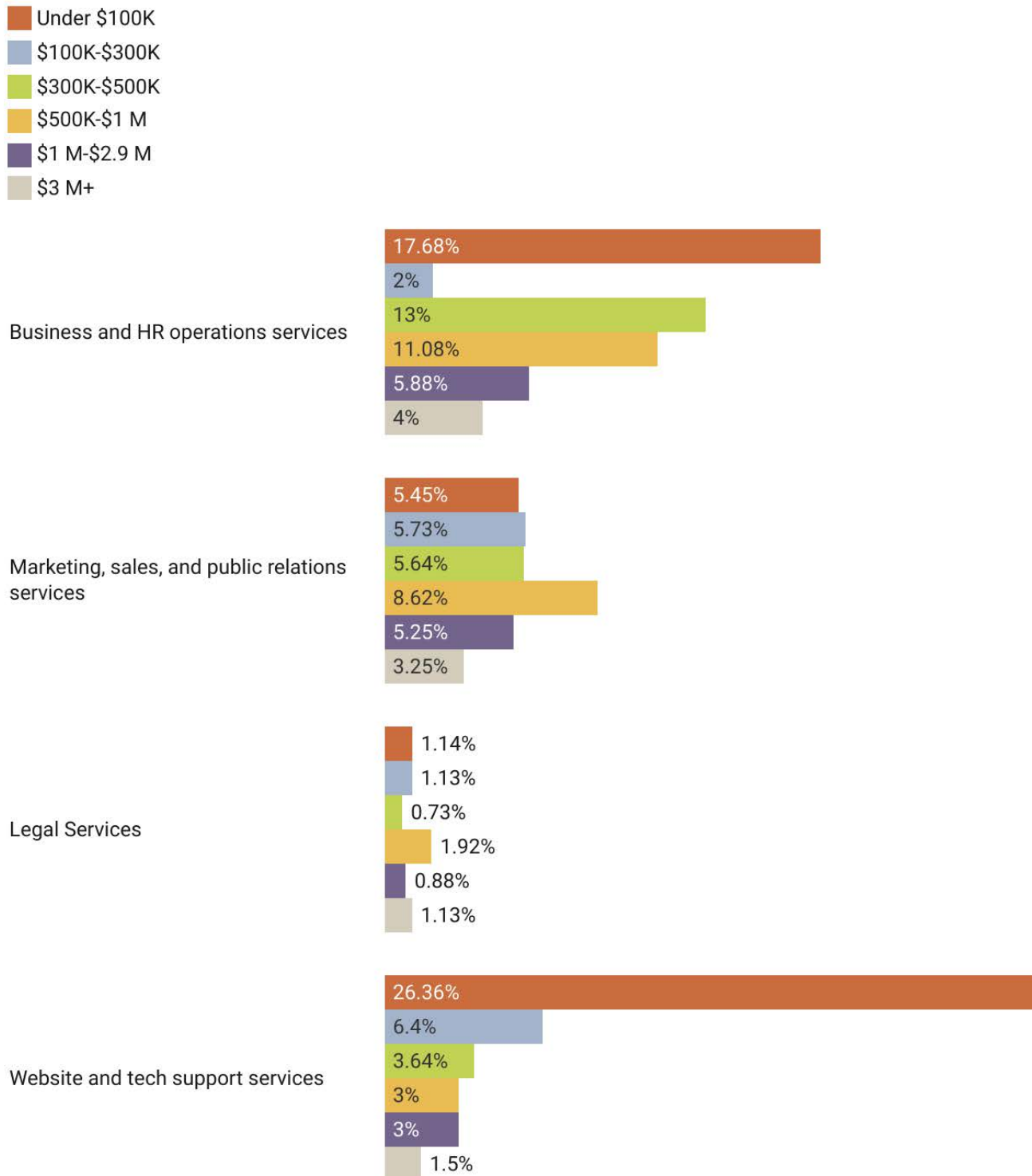
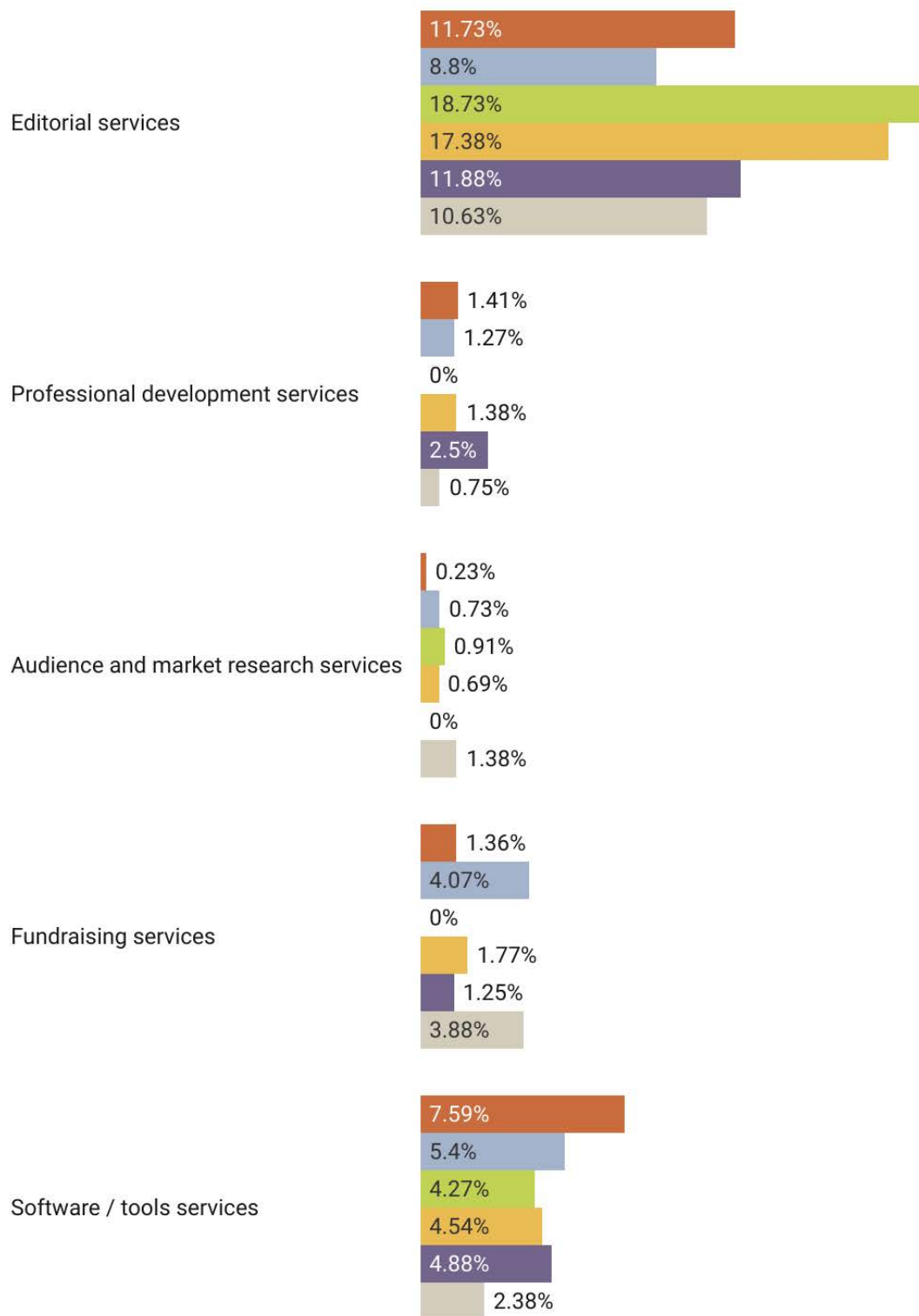


Figure K: Overview: Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Organization Size (*continued on next page*)



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Figure K: Overview: Comparing Average % of Budget Spent on Services per Organization Size

Participating Organizations

1. Better Government Association (Illinois Answers Project)
2. Block Club Chicago
3. Board Rule
4. Borderless
5. Bridge Art
6. Bronzeville Life
7. CAN TV
8. Chalkbeat
9. Chicago Current Magazines
10. Chicago in Arabic
11. Chicago Independent Media Alliance at Public Narrative
12. Chicago Music Guide
13. Chicago News Weekly
14. Chicago Public Media: WBEZ, Chicago Sun-Times, La Voz
15. Chicago Public Square
16. Chicago Reader
17. Chicago Southsider
18. CHIRP Radio
19. Cicero Independiente
20. Citizen Newspaper Group Inc.
21. City Bureau
22. City Cast Chicago
23. Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community
24. Des Plaines Journal
25. Dziennik Związkowy (Polish Daily News)
26. E3 Radio
27. EL Dia Newspaper
28. Enchúfate LLC
29. Evanston Now
30. Evanston Roundtable
31. Free Spirit Media
32. Growing Community Media (Austin Weekly News, Wednesday Journal, Forest Park Review, Riverside-Brookfield Landmark)
33. Harvey World Herald
34. Humboldt Park Magazine
35. Injustice Watch
36. Inside Publications
37. Investigate Midwest
38. Investigative Project on Race and Equity
39. Invisible Institute
40. La Estreya
41. La Raza
42. La Voz del Paseo Boricua
43. Latino News Network
44. Loop North News
45. Lumpen Radio
46. N'digo
47. N'digo Studio
48. Nadig Newspapers: Chicago's NW Side Press
49. Negocios Now
50. Newcity
51. Pigment International
52. Prisonality Magazine: SawariMedia
53. Rebellious Magazine for Women
54. Reparations Media
55. Respair: AirGo radio
56. Rivet360
57. Sixty Inches From Center
58. SoapBox Productions and Organizing
59. South Side Weekly
60. Streetsblog Chicago
61. StreetWise
62. Suburban Chicagoland, The Arab Daily News
63. The Beverly Review
64. The Bigs
65. The Chicago Maroon
66. The Chicago Reporter
67. The Daily Line
68. The Lansing Journal
69. The Loyola Phoenix
70. The Record North Shore
71. The Trace
72. The TRiBE
73. Third Coast Review
74. True Star Media
75. Unraveled
76. Urban Gateways
77. Windy City Times
78. WVON 1690AM

About This Report

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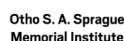
Photography: Eddie Quinones, Hannah Carroll, Wendy Wei

About the researcher

Audrey Azzo is a Lebanese-American journalist and researcher based in Chicago. An alumnus of the American University of Beirut and Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, she pursues data-driven approaches to research and report on unjust systemic practices related to human-rights abuses. She is currently the program coordinator for the Peer Learning Community, a cohort that sits within Medill's Local News Accelerator and provides peer-to-peer learning opportunities to the first round of Press Forward Chicago grantees. Her work supports Chicago's newsrooms in building infrastructure for a robust and inclusive local news ecosystem.

About Press Forward Chicago

Press Forward Chicago is part of a national movement of funders supporting sustainability in local journalism. While the decline of local news outlets is well-documented, there are also exciting new models of collaboration and innovation. We seek to create a thriving information ecosystem. The national Press Forward initiative and nearly 40 local Press Forward chapters are already deploying tens of millions of dollars to support local journalism. The Chicago fund, based at The Chicago Community Trust and supported by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, is backed by more than a dozen key funders.



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