



April 24, 2020

Honorable Larry Hogan
Governor of Maryland

Dear Governor Hogan:

We, the undersigned organizations, write to express our concern over the disappearance of local news and information in communities around the country — an [ongoing decline](#) that the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis [have accelerated](#). As you consider steps to protect Maryland’s economy at this precarious moment, we urge you to include targeted assistance to local journalism, just as you would with other industries deemed essential to our health, prosperity and recovery.

Local news outlets, ranging from state- to city- and community-level media organizations, are necessary partners in meeting the crucial information needs of people in the United States — especially during today’s public health and economic crises. As noted in your [executive order](#) on March 30, news media organizations are considered essential.

Community-specific news has never been more important to ensuring people’s well-being, yet many outlets will not survive COVID-19 without immediate economic help. Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, local news outlets have been providing indispensable, real-time updates on information imperative to safeguarding America’s communities. Fact-based reporting on local “shelter-in-place” orders, business closures, testing sites, school policies, government aid and health services are just a few of the areas in which national media coverage cannot replace community reporting. For example, some local outlets have shifted coverage to [fill the language gap](#) on COVID-19 information after being flooded with questions indicating that information on the pandemic was not being effectively communicated to immigrant communities.

In recognition of the need to keep the public informed, many local outlets have dropped their paywalls for COVID-19-related coverage, even at the expense of much-needed revenue. However, COVID-19’s devastating economic impact on local news outlets is threatening their ability to function at all. Over the past several weeks, in the face of plummeting ad revenue, dozens of local publications across the country — from the [largest chains](#) to [successful nonprofit](#) and [community outlets](#) to tribal media¹ and [family-owned](#) newspapers — have furloughed or laid off their reporters, [reduced their publication frequency](#), or dropped their print editions altogether. In an industry that employs more than 80,000 people

¹ According to preliminary results from a survey being conducted by the Native American Journalists Association, about 43 percent of tribal media are facing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, with around 29 percent facing furloughs or layoffs.

nationwide, many outlets are now struggling to cover even half of their reporters' salaries, with newsroom layoffs increasing across the country.

In the wake of widespread business closures and the dropoff in advertising revenue, local news outlets in Maryland are suffering. To give just one concrete example, last month, Adams Publishing Group (APG) announced across-the-board [pay cuts](#) and reduction of hours. APG owns the *Cecil Whig* in Elkton and the *Star Democrat* in Easton. The *Whig* is now appealing for reader donations.

Cuts to local media significantly impact communities' ability to receive critical news and information. Local news outlets that serve people of color, low-income households and other marginalized groups that are [disproportionately impacted](#) by COVID-19 and its economic fallout may not have sufficient resources to provide robust news and information on the pandemic. For example, rampant misinformation about Black people's immunity from COVID-19 may have directly contributed to a climbing death rate — so far, 70 percent of people who have died in Chicago and Louisiana are Black, that number is 81 percent in Milwaukee. Without adequate resources, local news outlets cannot meet communities' information needs, putting public safety, the economy, and, ultimately, our democracy at risk.

The financial crisis facing news outlets today adds to the devastation of a decade-long decline in local news. In the past 15 years, due to consolidations and a collapsing business model, [one in four local newspapers across the United States has closed](#) — a trend that has left many Americans struggling to find trustworthy news and particularly vulnerable to disinformation.

As we face what the World Health Organization has described as an “infodemic,” Americans cannot endure an accelerated decline in access to vital information. And like other adversely affected sectors of the economy, local news cannot withstand the hardships of COVID-19 and the worsening economic crisis without government support. While local news outlets can compete with all other small businesses for a loan through the CARES Act, none of those funds were specifically set aside in recognition of the “essential service” provided by local journalism, and those funds have now run dry. We have also called on Congress to include support for local news in the next stimulus, which has already garnered support from [19 Senators](#) and [over 50 organizations](#) that support and represent media organizations.

To ensure that communities across the country can find the news and information they need to navigate the public health and economic crises, we ask you to commit to supporting local journalism in your economic recovery plans. This should include:

- Emergency funds targeted at preserving newsrooms and reporting jobs at local commercial and nonprofit news outlets
- Investments to address the civic-information needs of communities most impacted by the long-term decline of local news and the spread of news deserts — including communities of color, immigrant communities, Indigenous communities, rural communities, and working-class communities
- Increased state spending on public health and other government advertising, prioritizing local and community media
- Safeguards to ensure that public funding does not impinge on the editorial independence of any news organization

We are grateful for your attention to this matter and stand ready to provide additional information and guidance.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Nossel, PEN America

Craig Aaron, Free Press Action

Michael Copps, Common Cause and former FCC commissioner

Joanne Antoine, Common Cause Maryland