Press Forward Chicago RFP
RFP Release Date: March 31, 2025
Information Sessions: Thursday, April 10, 3 p.m. and Thursday, April 17, 2 p.m., 2025, via Teams meeting.
Full Application Deadline: May 8, 2025
Site Visits: As needed May/June
Funding Decisions: July, 2025
Announcements: August-September 2025
General inquiries: Tracy Baim, tbaim@cct.org

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 Proposals will focus on capacity building.

Through its investments, Press Forward Chicago seeks to:
• 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.

This is the second year of capacity building grants. In 2024, Press Forward Chicago awarded [13 two-year grants](#) to support smaller community media organizations. The 13 media organizations that received grants in the first round will not be eligible to apply for this grant round.

This will not be the only funding opportunity from Press Forward Chicago in 2025.

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.

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.

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:

- Support hyperlocal or local media organizations seeking to increase their current reach through audience expansion and the adoption of new business strategies and approaches; and
- Experimenting with practices to build sustainable revenue models.

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.

- **Audience Growth and Engagement**: Efforts to increase audience numbers across various platforms, including newsletters. Additionally, growth of audience engagement across platforms.
- **Sustainability**: Organizations developing new, scalable business models for their own stability and financial sustainability in local news.

Grantmaking Criteria:
This funding opportunity is for capacity-building project support only. Applying organizations will be evaluated based on their capacity to provide services and best practices that meet the priority strategies outlined above.

Grant Amounts Available and Grant Term:
This funding opportunity is for one year of capacity-building support. Grant recipients are expected to meet The Chicago Community Trust's requirements for submitting financial and narrative reports at the end of the grant cycle.

Press Forward Chicago will award up to 12 grants between $25,000-$75,000 each.

Peer Learning Community
Press Forward Chicago is committed to leveraging the collaborative ethos of Chicago. A peer learning initiative working with our first grant recipients offers practitioner, organizational, and network support to foster greater collaboration and bolster the journalism community's capacity to operate more effectively. 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 Chicago and/or the neighboring suburbs. Nonprofits, educational institutions, independent media outlets, and fiscally sponsored journalism projects with an operating budget of less than $5 million are eligible to apply.

- 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 Chicago and/or nearby suburbs within Cook County.
- 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
- Those receiving the first-round 2024 grants from Press Forward Chicago.

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 final report 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 is a new activity or for those individuals who would like to learn more about developing Measures of Progress, the Trust is happy to provide additional assistance. 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. Please limit the total number of Measures of Progress and indicators to three to five to minimize the reporting burden.

Choose the outcome(s) and related measures of progress for at least one funding priority. The funding priorities are as follows:
- **Audience Growth and Engagement**

- **Financial Sustainability**

Outcome: Expand audience and/or deepen engagement
Measure of Progress: Increase in number of new members/participants
Example Indicators: (Please use numbers for your baseline and targets not % change). Pick up to 2.
- # of subscribers (to your social media channels, newsletter, YouTube channels)
- # of unique monthly visitors to your website
- # of unique monthly listeners (to your podcast, radio station, radio program)
- # of unique monthly viewers to your TV broadcast station
- Audience growth rate (total audience/new followers)

Measure of Progress: Increase participation with media outlet
Example indicators: (Pick up to 2)
(Please use numbers for your baseline and targets not % change.
- Engagement rate (total engagement/total followers)
- # of opens (emails, newsletters)
- # of click throughs, shares, retweets
- # of likes/reactions
- # of downloads of content
- # of story comments, mentions, tags
- # social media impressions
- # of events
  - # of participants attending events
- Other: please describe how you measure participation with your media outlet. List your baseline and target in numbers not percentages.

Outcome: Increase financial sustainability of local news
Pick one Measure of Progress
Measure of Progress: Increase diversification of revenue within revenue stream
Measure of Progress: Increase diversification of revenue across revenue streams

*Example indicators: All applicants should report on **revenue growth** and 1 additional indicator*

- *Dollars of revenue*
- *# of new contributors/donors*
- *# new roles created/expanded to build new, scalable business*
- # of revenue sources

Collection of Demographic Data:
The Chicago Community Trust serves a wide variety of constituents and organizations and believes in the value of diversity. As such, we collect organizational demographic data and semi-regularly review the data to inform our outreach and representation of our funding to ensure we are contributing to our mission of a thriving, equitable, and connected Chicago region. We also ask that you share with us the demographics of your organization's board, leadership, and staff. The data collected are not criteria used for funding. The demographic composition of The Trust staff and board is available on our website here.

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 **May 8, 2025.** The Full Applications will be reviewed and selected by The Chicago Community Trust.
☐ Review committee members will conduct site visits as needed between **May and June 2025.**
☐ Funding decisions will be made by **July 2025.**
☐ Applicants will be notified of awards between **August/September 2025.**

Applicants who submitted a Full Application but were not chosen for funding also will be notified by August 2025.

Information Sessions:
Information sessions are scheduled for Thursday, April 10, 3 p.m. and Thursday, April 17, 2 p.m., 2025, via Teams meeting.

April 10 link:

Join the meeting now
Meeting ID: 281 713 605 57
Passcode: gD7pc3LK

April 17 link:
Join the meeting now
Meeting ID: 230 178 710 704
Passcode: wX6HW2ST

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.
For learning and impact, email learning@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.*

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.*