

# Evaluation of the Colorado Media Project

## Summary Report

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The Colorado Media Project's (CMP) mission is to support people, projects, and organizations working to build a healthier, more equitable, solutions-focused local news and information ecosystem for all Coloradans. Established in 2018, CMP aims to serve as a center of gravity for cross-sector efforts to address urgent problems that threaten democracy, including a decline in local journalism, widespread digital disinformation, and increased polarization and mistrust.

CMP's initial work was focused on conducting and sharing research, convening diverse stakeholders, and testing new ideas and solutions. It has significantly expanded and evolved over time, collaborating with philanthropic funders, media partners, and others to support major new initiatives, including the [Colorado News Collaborative](#) (COLab), the [Advancing Equity in Local News](#) grant program, and the [#newsCOnneeds](#) matching grant program. CMP pools funding from and works collaboratively with a set of key philanthropic partners: the Rose Community Foundation (which serves as CMP's fiscal sponsor), the Colorado Health Foundation, the Colorado Trust, the Democracy Fund, the Gates Family Foundation, and Bohemian Foundation. CMP's work is also grounded in its ecosystem-level roles as connector, capacity builder, and partner, working with the Colorado Press Association, COLab, the Colorado News Conservancy, and other organizations to strengthen the efficiency and sustainability of the ecosystem.

### Scope of this evaluation

In January 2023, CMP commissioned an external evaluation to learn about how it is contributing to the ecosystem and how it can strengthen its strategy, its value as a partner, and its own capacity to sustain the work. As a relatively young and still evolving organization, CMP sought to gather evaluative insights that would help it assess progress to date and inform its strategy going forward. To help ground the evaluation, CMP developed a preliminary theory of change, which articulated outcomes that CMP's work is intended to help advance. These outcomes are anchored around a set of priority areas guiding CMP's work over the three-year period of 2022-2024:

- **Equity and Inclusion:** Greater equity and inclusion in how Colorado's local news and information ecosystem engages with and serves communities of color, linguistically diverse communities, rural communities, and other historically marginalized communities.
- **Trusted Local News:** Greater access to high-quality local coverage of important issues, providing Coloradans with critical information they want, trust, and need to engage in their communities, civic life, and democracy.
- **Sustainability and Efficiency:** Stronger investment in local news by philanthropy, public funding sources, and news consumers, and more ecosystem-level opportunities that support efficient and sustainable community reporting at the local level.

The evaluation was designed to offer initial insights into these three priority areas, focusing primarily on CMP's work in 2022. The evaluation placed particular emphasis on exploring early evidence of how CMP's roles as a grantmaker and capacity builder are contributing to intended outcomes. The evaluation drew on data from 15 interviews with grantees, funders, and other stakeholders, along with grant reports and other internal data and strategy documents shared by CMP. This summary report shares some of the key findings, lessons learned, and strategic considerations that emerged from the evaluation.

## Equity and inclusion

### Key questions guiding the evaluation:

- To what extent do we observe evidence of CMP's contributions towards intended outcomes?
- What supports have been particularly helpful?
- Where are there gaps or challenges?
- What are strategic considerations that can help inform CMP's work going forward?

**CMP Priority:** Greater equity and inclusion in how Colorado's local news and information ecosystem engages with and serves communities of color, linguistically diverse communities, rural communities, and other historically marginalized communities.

CMP launched two grant programs to help advance progress on this priority area: the Community News Network program, which awarded three-year general operating support to seven community-based newsrooms; and the Advancing Equity in Local News (AELN) grant program, which offers one-year project grants – the first round of which were awarded in 2022. The projects funded through the AELN grant program reflect recommendations from the [Voices Initiative](#), a set of four working groups comprised of Black, Latinx, Asian, South Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous community members and journalists in Colorado. Launched in early 2021, the Voices working groups are convened by COLab in partnership with CMP.

### Signs of progress: CMP's contributions

CMP's support has helped newsrooms dedicate time and resources towards internal work on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and strengthen their relationship-building efforts with communities. It has also helped newsrooms launch new initiatives to support DEI in the ecosystem as a whole. Four areas of contribution emerged in the evaluation findings:

- **Supporting individual change within newsrooms:** Newsrooms that used AELN grants to undertake discrete internal DEI activities – most commonly trainings – reported examples of immediate changes in reporters' and editors' mindsets or practices.
- **Strengthening practices for building more trusting and equitable community relationships.** CMP's grantmaking enabled newsrooms to build new community relationships and to demonstrate to communities their commitment to listening – for example, through activities like community events and audience research, and through efforts to publicly recognize community members' accomplishments. The Voices Initiative was also credited with offering valuable opportunities for newsrooms to listen, learn, and connect with community members.

- **Building more entry points to a diverse pipeline.** Early evidence of progress came from CMP’s grants to support a more diverse pipeline through internship programs for students of color. By helping students develop practical journalism skills and nurturing their enthusiasm to pursue journalism careers, such internship programs hold promise as long-term infrastructure that supports greater diversity in the ecosystem.
- **Creating new professional affinity groups and peer networks to support equity and inclusion for journalists and publishers of color.** Promising preliminary steps were initiated to support efforts by journalists and publishers of color to revive the Denver chapter of the Association for Asian American Journalists and to convene the Ethnic Media Exchange as an opportunity for ethnic media outlets to discuss funding, disinformation in communities, and other shared challenges. It is still early days for both efforts, but they can potentially address gaps in supportive infrastructure that journalists and publishers of color need in order to thrive.

### Lessons: What’s needed to deepen progress

Advancing equity and inclusion is an ambitious and long-term priority, and much remains to be done to break down systemic barriers. **Key challenges include:**

- **Addressing gaps in evidence of deeper organizational transformation.** AELN grants did not yield strong evidence of change at the organizational level, such as changes in newsroom policies, procedures, or hiring and retention practices, or structural shifts in who holds leadership positions and decision-making power. This points to questions around how well organizations are able to leverage AELN grants to implement – and sustain – systemic, structural changes internally.
- **Deepening the influence of communities in setting the news agenda and shaping stories told about them.** Newsrooms’ relationship-building and listening efforts created opportunities for communities to exert some level of influence over the news agenda. But this influence may be relatively light in cases where newsrooms gather community input on a sporadic or one-off basis. There were few examples of approaches that gave communities deeper and ongoing influence over which stories are told, how they are told, and by whom – for example by establishing more formal and sustained structures through which community members can contribute to the editorial process.
- **Tracking diversity at the ecosystem level.** The Voices Initiative working groups have highlighted diversity tracking and public disclosure of staff demographics as a priority. CMP and its partners are well-positioned to coordinate an ecosystem-level effort to track diversity across Colorado newsrooms, but gaps in the capacity and/or willingness of newsrooms to participate proved challenging to overcome – mirroring some of the [difficulties](#) experienced by the News Leaders Association’s nationwide efforts to track diversity in the news industry.

*“You’ve got to really include those neighborhood voices and be very intentional about involving them in the process. I don’t think that we’re quite there yet.”*

The evaluation also pointed to **key supports that can help deepen progress:**

- **Providing sustained funding to reinforce new pieces of ecosystem-supporting infrastructure.** Opportunities for continued support are important for sustaining newly seeded initiatives that serve as pieces of ecosystem-supporting infrastructure, such as journalism internship programs for students of color and the Ethnic Media Exchange. These initiatives need time to develop and formalize the internal systems and external partnerships that will help them sustain operations over the long term.

- **Investing long-term in the process of building community trust.** Newsrooms emphasize that building trust – especially with communities harmed by newsrooms in the past – requires a long-term commitment of showing up, listening, and consistently producing stories that respect how communities want their stories to be told. Short-term grants run the risk of disrupting this process if newsrooms have to pause their relationship-building and trust-building efforts when funding runs out. The three-year Community News Network grants reflect the longer time horizon needed to sustain this work.
- **Intentionally weaving together infrastructure.** Based on learning from its 2022 grants, CMP decided to support multiple internship initiatives in 2023. To help bolster the success of these initiatives, CMP can look for ways to build bridges between these pipeline efforts and other pieces of ecosystem infrastructure, such as professional affinity groups for journalists of color and network hubs that may be able to connect young journalists with newsrooms looking to hire.

## Trusted local news

**CMP Priority:** Strengthened access to high-quality local coverage of important issues, providing Coloradans with critical information they want, trust, and need to engage in their communities, civic life, and democracy.

To advance progress on this priority area, CMP aims to strengthen newsrooms’ capacity to produce and disseminate local coverage. A core component of this effort is providing direct grants to outlets to cover the operational and staffing costs of expanding their content and distribution. CMP also launched the [Watchdog Fund](#), which provides access to legal support and reimbursement for public records requests.

### Signs of progress: CMP’s contributions

Funding from CMP made a significant contribution to the capacity of community-based outlets to expand their local coverage, including reporting that helps deepen understanding across communities and supports civic and democratic participation. Two areas of contribution emerged as particularly impactful:

- **Experimenting with shared staffing models.** Two of the Community News Network grants supported efforts to experiment with “shared hire” models for expanding the reporting capacity of multiple newsrooms. One model enabled two newsrooms to share a reporter focused on underrepresented communities, and the second model created an editor position to support capacity-building and content-sharing across a coalition of newsrooms. Both models helped the participating newsrooms increase the volume of local coverage they were able to offer their audiences, beyond what they otherwise could do with their own resources.
- **Expanding access to Spanish-language coverage.** CMP’s grants to two Spanish-language newspapers enabled them to increase the amount of local content they published and expand circulation to new geographic areas. In addition to three-year grants to support their operating costs, CMP layered on a supplemental grant to enable the two outlets to collaborate on a special supplement covering the 2022 elections. This enabled them to bring more candidate interviews to Spanish-speakers than this audience typically has access to.

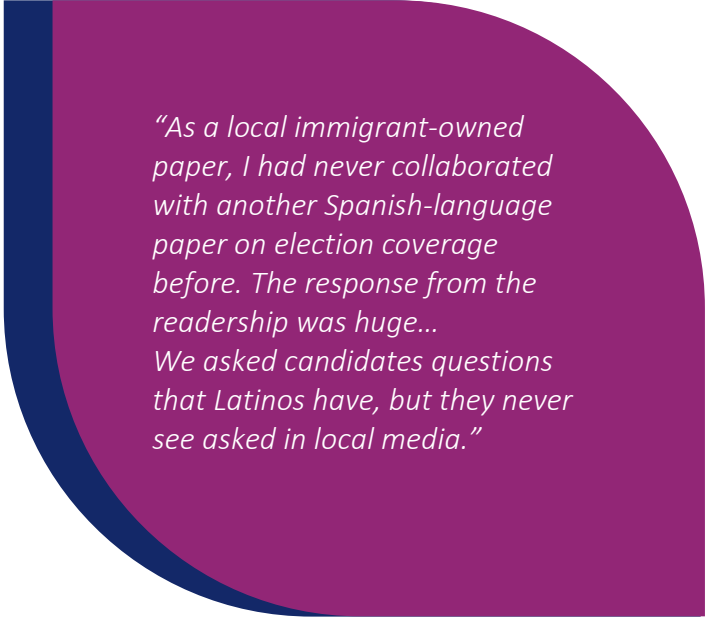
## Lessons: What's needed to deepen progress

Findings from the evaluation point to **two gaps in newsroom capacity** to expand access to high-quality local reporting:

- **Addressing barriers to local accountability journalism.** According to Corona Insights' [statewide survey](#), commissioned by CMP in 2022, nearly half of respondents think that state and local media do only a fair or poor job of holding the powerful accountable. The Watchdog Fund is intended to be an ecosystem-wide resource helping to expand local accountability reporting through reimbursement for public records requests and provision of pro bono legal support and training. However, the reimbursement mechanism was used only a handful of times in 2022, and there isn't sufficient data to assess the use and impact of the legal support. The evaluation findings also point to broader questions about the kind of support that local newsrooms need to overcome barriers to producing more accountability journalism, including limited staff capacity.
- **Tracking the reach and impact of translation and bilingual efforts by English-language outlets.** In 2022, CMP supported efforts of English-language outlets to translate their stories into other languages or expand their Spanish-language programming. While these efforts increased the availability of non-English content, more data are needed to understand whether and how these efforts enabled stories to reach and impact the intended audiences. Particularly in cases where an outlet has primarily served an English-speaking audience, its ability to successfully reach non-English speaking audiences is partly a function of whether these audiences are aware of and trust the outlet.

Lessons about **what helps support progress** in this priority area include:

- **Providing flexible, multi-year grants.** Flexible grants enable newsrooms to pay for various operational needs related to expanding local news coverage, tailored to their respective staffing and distribution models and needs. Long-term funding acknowledges the time it takes to hire and onboard new staff or to train existing staff.
- **Funding mutually beneficial newsroom collaborations.** Collaborative approaches serve as a useful mechanism for expanding access to high-quality local coverage because they enable outlets to publish a larger set of stories – including stories about communities or issues that would otherwise be under-covered – than they can produce on their own. It takes time and resources for newsrooms to develop and implement collaborations that are mutually beneficial and sustainable.



*“As a local immigrant-owned paper, I had never collaborated with another Spanish-language paper on election coverage before. The response from the readership was huge... We asked candidates questions that Latinos have, but they never see asked in local media.”*

## Sustainability and efficiency

**CMP Priority:** Stronger investment in local news by philanthropy, public funding sources, and news consumers, and more ecosystem-level opportunities that support efficient and sustainable community reporting at the local level.

This priority area encompasses multiple components that play a role in the sustainability and efficiency of the news and information ecosystem. One component is revenue, which CMP has sought to address at multiple levels – from individual newsrooms to the philanthropic sector to the public policy space. CMP also aims to improve efficiency and sustainability through its support for collaboration and growth among newsrooms.

### Signs of progress: CMP's contributions

CMP has played a significant role in supporting collaborations and connections that contribute to efficiency and strengthen access to local news. CMP has also played valuable roles in bolstering individual giving and philanthropic revenue streams for newsrooms. **Key areas of contribution include:**

- **Supporting collaborations to improve efficiency.** CMP places a strong emphasis on collaboration as a mechanism for improving the ecosystem's efficiency in meeting the information needs of Coloradans. In addition to the collaborative examples cited above, CMP has funded COLab to serve as a hub for collaborative opportunities. Newsrooms that have participated in COLab's collaborative reporting projects described the value of the editorial support and mentorship that COLab staff provide. COLab is contributing to efficiency by taking the burden of these editorial roles off individual newsrooms, whose staff capacity is typically stretched thin. Newsrooms also noted the utility of AP's StoryShare, a content-sharing platform that COLab enables outlets to access. StoryShare contributes to efficiency by enabling outlets to access free content and get their stories picked up by other outlets across the state.
- **Strengthening newsroom capacity to fundraise from individual donors.** Since 2018, CMP has supported the #newsCOnneeds matching challenge, which provides \$5,000 matching grants coupled with one-on-one coaching and other campaign support from COLab. The matching challenge has shown a steady annual increase in the number of participating newsrooms and the amount of money raised from individual contributors. In 2022, 33 newsrooms each received a \$5,000 matching grant (for a total matching pool of \$165,000), which they collectively leveraged to raise \$832,720 in small contributions from 5,406 individual contributors.
- **Deepening funders' understanding of and coordination around support for Colorado's news and information ecosystem.** Funder interviewees confirmed that CMP's expertise on local news and information ecosystems has provided them with technical knowledge about the current challenges facing local newsrooms, as well as access to data on Coloradans' news and information needs, particularly in underserved communities. Funders observed that CMP also plays an important role facilitating peer learning and knowledge sharing among funders working at the local, state, and national level. As a central table for funders to pool their support for media grantmaking, CMP has helped funders support the ecosystem in a way that no single foundation could do on its own – while also helping to facilitate complementarity in the direct grants that these funders make separately from CMP.

*“CMP has given pathways for funders to find opportunities to support informed communities, to support journalism.”*

## Lessons: What's needed to deepen progress

While CMP has made substantial contributions to the efficiency and sustainability of Colorado's news and information ecosystem, this is a sprawling area of work. The evaluation findings point to **three challenges** that hinder CMP's efforts to support stronger investment in local news and more efficient and sustainable community reporting:

- **Addressing the immediate pressures that prevent newsrooms from focusing on long-term sustainability.**

CMP recognizes that news organizations – particularly small community-based outlets – can be highly vulnerable to destabilizing factors, including staff turnover, leadership changes, and ownership transitions. Some of CMP's three-year grants have contributed to newsrooms' capacity to weather these factors, but there is a need for more ecosystem-level opportunities to help the many local newsrooms that aren't able to focus on long-term sustainability as they deal with the immediate pressures of staying afloat amid perennial staffing and resource shortages.

*"Because the overall level of funding for small local news outlets is very low, people don't stay in these jobs. They get experience and then they leave."*

- **Filling gaps in information about the value and impact of ecosystem supports.** It is difficult to measure progress towards efficiency and sustainability without adequate learning and evaluation mechanisms in place. For example, CMP needs better data on the use of content-sharing platforms like StoryShare to understand how well the ecosystem is able to leverage the quality content that is produced and made available for republication. It also lacks sufficient data on the impact of the #newsCOnneeds coaching support on newsrooms' long-term capacity to effectively run fundraising campaigns. As CMP continues to advance work in this area – including new efforts to support digital transformation and sustainability audits in 2023 – it will be important to systematically capture information on whether and how these supports have impacted newsrooms' sustainability. Such evaluation efforts will yield valuable contributions to the evidence base around what it takes to support an efficient and sustainable local news and information ecosystem.

- **Making a deeper and more strategic investment in efforts to advance policy solutions.** As part of its theory of change, CMP aims to help stakeholders work together to advance policy solutions that create sustainable revenue streams for local news organizations. This has been a relatively limited area of work for CMP. What's needed to effectively advance this work, if CMP opts to strengthen its focus here: a deep analysis of potential short- and long-term solutions and the relevant political, social, and economic contextual factors, as well as an understanding of the advocacy capacity needed to develop and advance a comprehensive strategy towards long-term policy solutions.

The evaluation yielded initial insights into the **supports that help advance progress** in this area of work:

- **Layering capacity support and opportunities.** One of CMP's strengths as an ecosystem-level capacity builder is its ability to layer opportunities for newsrooms to access funding, capacity-building resources, and peer learning opportunities. Most of CMP's grantees had one or more other touch points with CMP – through their participation in the #newsCOnneeds matching challenge, through other capacity-building and peer networking opportunities that CMP organized, and/or through the more informal, ongoing support that CMP provides when responding to grantees' questions and helping connect them to peers and other sources of support. In this way, newsrooms benefit not just from money attached to a single grant, but also from access to a network of resources, people, and opportunities that can help them learn, collaborate, and grow.

- **Commissioning and enabling uptake of ecosystem-level research.** Research that CMP has commissioned – such as its recent work supporting a [project to map Colorado's journalism producers and news deserts](#), and a [statewide survey](#) of attitudes towards state and local media – offers valuable information that funders and other stakeholders use to inform their efforts to support local news and information ecosystems, both within Colorado and nationally.
- **Providing opportunities for connecting, learning, and breaking down silos.** Journalists, editors, and publishers value opportunities to connect with others who share common interests and challenges. Despite the difficulty of taking time away from the daily demands of producing the news, grantees see these opportunities for peer networking, information-sharing, and mutual learning as a worthwhile time investment. Several of them mentioned the value of connections they made or strengthened at the [Advancing Equity in Local News Convening](#), organized by CMP in 2022. Grantees also observed that being part of collaborations encourages outlets to recognize and embrace the value-add of collaboration, as opposed to competition. They have observed a reduction in silos across newsrooms, thanks to the collaborative orientation of CMP and COLab.

*“I think that [competitive orientation] has completely changed. We’ve seen that with groups like Colorado Media Project, where we’re all in this together because we’re all doing different things... That has really fostered a sense of collaboration.”*

## Strategic considerations

Grantees, funders, and other stakeholders see CMP's work as important for advancing and sustaining progress within Colorado. It is also perceived as a valuable contributor towards nationwide efforts to support sustainable local news and information ecosystems. Although CMP was originally conceived as a time-limited “project,” there is consensus that CMP needs to continue to play a strong role in support of the Colorado news and information ecosystem for the foreseeable future. As CMP and its partners chart a path forward for the coming years, it will be helpful to weigh the following strategic considerations.

### 1. Deepening progress towards DEI

CMP has explored various pathways to advancing DEI, including developing ecosystem-level infrastructure and resources, supporting internal DEI changes within newsrooms, and bolstering the capacity of small outlets led by and for people of color and other underserved groups.

- Which pathways should CMP focus on, and what type of grants (short-term vs. multi-year, project vs. unrestricted) are needed to effectively advance progress along those pathways?
- How can CMP deepen the synergy among its grantmaking and non-grantmaking efforts?
- How will CMP measure progress towards systemic change over the long term?



## 2. Sharpening contributions towards sustainability

Sustainability is an ambitious goal, operating both at the newsroom level and the ecosystem level. Efforts to support sustainability will benefit from greater clarity around what it means – and what it takes – to be “sustainable” at both of these levels.

- How does CMP define “sustainability”? Which pieces of sustainability can CMP best help advance? Where does it need more information to inform its strategic priorities and approach?
- As a grantmaker, what is CMP’s role in supporting operating costs of newsrooms? How do CMP’s grants impact the ability of newsrooms – particularly smaller, fragile organizations – to operate sustainably over the long term?

## 3. Clarifying and strengthening CMP’s strategy and roles in the ecosystem

One of CMP’s strengths is its birds-eye view of the ecosystem, which allows it to see where the gaps or opportunities are and help organize an ecosystem response. CMP needs to balance this responsive, emergent orientation with clear strategic priorities and roles within the ecosystem.

- As CMP continues to evaluate and respond to emerging needs and opportunities, how can it use a set of decision-making criteria to more clearly determine strategic alignment?
- While still honoring CMP’s commitment to partnership and collaboration, what are key roles that CMP needs to take clearer ownership of? Where does it need to step back?
- What internal capacity (staffing, connections, expertise, and operational capacity) is needed to ensure CMP can sustain its work?

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*The evaluation was conducted by independent consultants Susanna Dilliplane, PhD, and Gigi Barsoum, PhD, MPH. This summary report distills insights from a longer report produced for CMP’s internal learning purposes.*