Report For America and Local Public Media Organizations

Report for America is a principal current program of the nonprofit GroundTruth Project. GroundTruth’s mission is to “restore journalism from the ground up” by putting talented journalists in the field “reporting on underserved communities and important topics.”

Here are the basics, which have been evolving since the program launched four years ago:

- **RFA holds two competitions. One is for local newsrooms that seek to address gaps in their coverage (e.g., geographic, topical, demographic) and have a plan to support a journalist to take up the beat. Another is for emerging journalists who apply to serve these communities.**
- **RFA manages selections of both newsrooms and reporters and the matchmaking between them, which may involve presenting several candidates to a host newsroom.**
- **Report for America considers itself a two-year program with a new, optional third year. During the first year, RFA pays half the corps member’s salary; 33% in the second year and 20% in the third year.**
- **The RFA contribution cap for emerging reporters (those with fewer than 8 years’ experience) is $25,000 the first year, and there’s no cap for subsequent years. The cap for a new “experienced corps,” (those with 8 and more years’ experience, who can also do some editing if the newsroom desires) is $30,000 the first year, with no cap for future years.**
- **RFA provides training and support at the beginning and through the term of the arrangement.**

The recent announcement of 300 RFA placements for 2021-22 is by far the largest annual cohort to date and includes a number of reporters serving second and third years with the program. Most of the reporters are relatively early in their journalism careers, but as a group they bring more experience than many might assume. The new “experienced corps” includes 11 mid- and late-career journalists.

Significantly, 45% of the 2021-22 cohort are journalists of color. As RFA puts it, they will help their organizations’ journalism better reflect the communities they serve.

Seeing familiar call letters in the RFA announcement, SRG reviewed all the Report for America positions, beginning with the first “corps” of 10 in 2018-2019 and through the recent group. We
found 70 reporters who have been placed in public media over four years – 36 of them at SRG members.

All 70 public media RFA reporters are in an appendix to this report, with links to their bios and beats. Take a look and click on names for a sampling. It is an interesting and inspiring mix.

One driver for the growing presence for public media is that, for the first time in 2021, CPB is collaborating to support 10 of the journalists at local public radio stations. According to RFA, over the next two years CPB will provide nearly $650,000 to fund half the reporters’ salaries in the first year and 42% in the second year, with Report for America and stations paying the remainder.

CPB is also funding RFA resources directed towards stations, including training and editorial support, core performance and excellence guidance, local sustainability, and fundraising resources, along with other grant management and support services.

According to RFA Senior Vice President Kim Kleman, “One of our big goals this year is to partner with more newsrooms and support more beats that help better cover rural America. Radio is a wonderfully efficient medium to do that.”

Doing Local at Scale

Taking a step back from the details, Report for America offers an interesting framework to move local journalism forward.

The RFA direct investment in any one position is relatively modest. But standing behind those individual positions are important factors in play with both GroundTruth and Report for America:

- There is a powerful premise first articulated by GroundTruth – building journalism from the ground up and focusing on underserved communities and underreported topics – that can be presented to an array of high-capacity donors and foundations.
- Fundraising infrastructure at GroundTruth provides the backbone of funding for the national program, while RFA supports participating newsrooms in raising funds for the local share of costs.
- GroundTruth provides administrative infrastructure – finance, technology, communications, and other functions that support RFA’s more frontline work.

For those who recall the years in which SRG launched and incubated PRX and Public Media Company, this is a familiar and powerful dynamic. In addition:

- The RFA newsroom selections are agnostic with respect to for-profit and nonprofit newsrooms and across multiple media and platforms.
- A personnel development team at RFA recruits, vets, places, and supports the selected journalists – a major element of the program.
• An RFA organizational development team recruits and supports local news organizations for the project and evaluates the results.

All this prompts several points for discussion and about which SRG members’ thoughts would be helpful.

First, for the many SRG members that have experience with at least one round of participation in RFA, how successful was/is the experience?

For those members that have not participated, is there a reason? Are the funds too limited? Do the areas of reporting focus not align with your priorities? Did your application not make the cut?

More broadly, should we, collectively, lean into this space? That is, are there ways in which this program could be made more valuable for the journalists and for public media?

• Are there ways we, as a field, could support the most successful and promising of the emerging journalists surfacing in this program to pursue their careers in public media? With the initial identification and “field testing” behind us, this could be a robust talent pool to sustain.
• Would it be helpful to do a periodic RFA “debrief” among participating public media organizations to highlight both successes and challenges?
• A looming challenge is resources to give the RFA corps the day-to-day training and editing they need to develop. Rick Holter, VP for News at KERA says “We’ve done that partly through The Texas Newsroom – our senior editor in San Antonio, for instance, is primary editor for the two RFA corps members based with TPR. But if we do a next-level expansion of RFAs to smaller stations across the state . . . they’ll have no editors at those stations because there’s little to no existing journalism capacity there.”
• Many public radio stations appear to be simply absorbing the local share of the RFA salaries. Could we develop approaches that apply proven fundraising techniques to generate support specifically around local RFA positions, promoting longer-term sustainability?
• Are there some donors or foundations – those with a national perspective and interests but an understanding of the local journalism crisis – that we should encourage to support the national program, in addition to their support of our own organizations?

Again, we welcome any thoughts that these questions might inspire.

Most funds that sustain and grow public media’s local journalism will continue to come from the communities that our local journalism serves. The funds will arrive as small one-time gifts, sustaining memberships, significant gifts from individuals of substantial means, place-based philanthropies, and an array of business sponsors.
But national endeavors like Report for America can have an effective role as well, accelerating our capacities one reporter at a time and leveraging the power of scale, coordination, and a common cause.

The following Appendix presents Report for America journalists that have been placed at local public media organizations over the four years of the program. A click on each journalist’s name will lead to their bio and the areas of reporting on which they focus. Images are courtesy of Report for America.
Report For America Journalists at Local Public Media Organizations

Daniel Ackerman
WCAI, Woods Hole, MA
Southern MA coastal towns

Vicki Adame
MPR News
Hispanic communities in Minnesota

Emily Allen
West Virginia Public Broadcasting
State government and southern West Virginia

Graham Ambrose
Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting
Youth, social services, and legislative accountability
Kassidy Arena
Iowa Public Radio
Iowa statehouse, especially issues affecting underserved populations

Antonia Ayres-Brown
The Public's Radio, Providence RI
Race and poverty in Newport R.I.

Roman Battaglia
Delaware Public Media
State and local elections

Aja Beckham
DCist
Covering minority and underrepresented communities in Wards 7 and 8 in D.C.
A.V. Benford
CapRadio & Sacramento Observer
Education in Sacramento area

Seth Bodine
KOSU Radio, Stillwater OK
Agriculture and rural issues in Oklahoma

Yvonne Boose
WNIN Northern Public Radio, Rockford IL
Cultural and spiritual community response in a Covid era

John Boyle
WFPL News Louisville
Southern Indiana
Laura Brache
WFAE / La Noticia Charlotte
Charlotte's growing Latino community

Keren Carrión
KERA/The Texas Newsroom
News deserts in exurban and rural Texas

Paul Braun
WWNO New Orleans Public Radio
Statehouse reporting in Baton Rouge

Rachel Cohen
Boise State Public Radio
Local Reporting on Twin Falls and Blaine County
Carolina Cuellar
Texas Public Radio, San Antonio
Business issues in Laredo and other border areas

Jasmine Demers
Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting, Louisville
Youth, social services, and legislative accountability in Kentucky

Gracyn Doctor
WFAE, Charlotte
Race and equity beat

Jacob Douglas
Kansas City PBS
Rural issues in Missouri
Dee Dwyer
DCist
Photojournalism involving minority communities in Wards 7 and 8 in D.C.

Caroline Eggers
WPLN Nashville Public Radio
Environmental equity in Nashville

Alanna Elder
WITF, Harrisburg
Local Latino angle on elections

Sara Ernst
Houston Public Media
Medical and health reporting in Houston
Mallory Falk
KERA/The Texas Newsroom
Border and immigration issues in El Paso

David Fuchs
NPR Utah, Salt Lake City
Energy and environment

Alejandro Figueroa
WYSO Public Radio, Dayton
Food insecurity and the business of food

Theodore Greenly
KUCB, Unalaska, AK
Regional reporting in the Eastern Aleutians
Kate Groetzinger
KUER, Salt Lake City
Indigenous issues in southern Utah

Catherine Hoffman
Kansas City PBS
Rural issues in Missouri

Katherine Hyson
WUFT, Gainesville
Rural racial justice in East Gainesville

Kyeland Jackson
Twin Cities Public Television
Racial disparities in Minnesota: causes, effects, and solutions
Sarah Kim
WYPR Your Public Radio, Baltimore
Health and housing

Tash Kimmel
KCAW, Sitka
Coverage of Sitka and surrounding communities

Alexa Krupp
Vermont Public Radio
Northeast Kingdom economic issues

Brenda León
Connecticut Public
Latino communities
Gabriela Losada
New Hampshire Public Radio
Latino communities in southern NH

Alejandra Martinez
KERA/The Texas Newsroom
Economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis

Gabriela Martinez
WITF, Harrisburg
Covering the intersection of race and identity in central Pennsylvania with a focus on the region’s fast-growing Latino community

Samantha Max
WPLN Nashville Public Radio
Criminal Justice in Nashville
Erin McKinstry
KCAW, Sitka
Sitka and surrounding communities

Maria Mendez
Texas Public Radio, San Antonio
Business issues in Laredo and other border areas

Kyra Miles
WBHM, Birmingham
Educational disparities in Birmingham, Alabama

Dante Miller
WFAE/Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
Digital Public Library of America
Unique partnership using radio and Wikipedia to fill news deserts
Kaitlyn Nicholas
Yellowstone Public Radio, Billings, MT
Native American issues

Anthony Orozco
WITF, Harrisburg
Latino communities in Reading, Lebanon, and others

Allyson Ortegon
KUT, Austin
Hays County and the strains of rapid development

Ali Oshinskie
Connecticut Public
The Naugatuck River Valley, especially blue-collar families
Lexi Peery  
KUER / NPR Utah, Salt Lake City  
Washington County

Juanpablo Ramirez  
WNJ Northern Public Radio, Rockford IL  
Substandard housing and police relations in northern Illinois

Katrina Pross  
WFYI, Indianapolis  
Criminal justice in central Indiana

Maria Ramirez Uribe  
WFAE / La Noticia, Charlotte  
Charlotte's growing Latino community
Maria Rodriguez
WFDD/La Noticia, Winston-Salem
COVID-19 recovery and the Latino community in Forsyth County, NC

Annie Rosenthal
Marfa Public Radio, Marfa TX
U.S.-Mexican border communities

Riane Roldan
KUT, Austin
Costs and benefits of suburban growth in Hays County

Eric Schmid
St. Louis Public Radio
Community reporting in the Metro East area in Illinois
Ari Snider
Maine Public
African and Asian refugee communities in Maine

Taylar Stagnar
Yellowstone Public Radio, Billings MT
Native American issues in Montana and Wyoming

Lucia Starbuck
KUNR Public Radio
Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in northern Nevada

Phoebe Taylor-Vuolo
WSKG, Binghamton, NY
Rural healthcare in New York State
Kevin Trevelyan
Yellowstone Public Radio, Billings MT
Montana statehouse

Camila Vallejo
Connecticut Public
Housing in Fairfield County

Richard Two Bulls
South Dakota Public Broadcasting
Ethnic communities including Native Americans

Anna Van Dine
Vermont Public Radio
Long-term effects of the pandemic in Vermont
Dominic Anthony Walsh
Texas Public Radio, San Antonio
Texas Hill Country

Alex Watts
WFAE/Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
Digital Public Library of America
Local government beat

Chris Welter
WYSO Public Radio, Dayton
Climate change and environmental issues

Nirvani Williams
New England Public Media
Socio-economic disparities, as part of an Equity Team based in Springfield
Megan Zerez
WSKG, Binghamton, NY
Education, Rural healthcare in New York State

Eve Zuckoff
WCAI, Woods Hole MA
Climate change impact on Cape Cod and the south shore of Massachusetts