



# Community Radio Responds to the Coronavirus Pandemic

## Introduction

Community radio is making profound efforts nationwide to serve local communities as they navigate the deadly and disruptive coronavirus pandemic. Stations are upholding key foundational public media services such as public safety, education and promoting civic responsibility through the distribution of timely news and information and entertainment that engages and uplifts their communities.

The coronavirus pandemic has been estimated to impact noncommercial broadcasting's revenue potential by millions of dollars. The impacts are far ranging and still unfolding. Already, we have seen public media news of staff layoffs, reductions in services, and warnings of financial catastrophe yet to come. Contraction is anticipated in many sectors. There is no doubt that this is an uncertain time for our industry.

For years, a dominant perception has been one of skepticism related to community radio. Common assumptions have been that community broadcasters are ill-equipped to offer responsive programming during times of emergency; do not have the resources to engage local audiences broadly; and do not have the innovative capacity that larger



*KECG (El Cerrito, California) offers multicultural programming via its Career Tech Ed program provided through the local high school.*

public media organizations do. NFCB's March 2021 examination of coronavirus response reveals a very different picture, one that illustrates a powerful role that community broadcasters play, a role seldom recognized or valued but delivered just the same.

In interviews and surveys with more than 100 broadcasters, NFCB found that stations serving diverse and often isolated communities are providing critical, consistent programming services during the pandemic. These stations pivoted from their conventional programming schedules to public safety news and public affairs programming blanketing the airwaves. In addition, numerous community stations are providing reliable daily coronavirus coverage that is sourced by local experts and curated, in many cases, by producers volunteering their skills in the public interest. Other findings NFCB discovered include:

- 73 percent of community broadcasters are airing daily coronavirus public service announcements, the vast majority of which are locally produced.
- 27 percent of community broadcasters are devoting 20-50 percent of their news programming to covering the pandemic. 20 percent cover the coronavirus in 50 percent or more of news coverage.
- 36 percent of community broadcasters are engaged in local/regional news and content collaborations around the pandemic and a host of related issues.
- 64 percent of these broadcasters are able to accomplish this level of public safety content with one staff person or less doing the work.

Rural communities and broadcasters serving BIPOC communities are doing a great deal with far less than their contemporaries in urban or institutional settings, underscoring core questions about equity that are confronting the public media system in this time of national reckoning on multiple fronts. NFCB believes, and our data suggests, that common perceptions about community broadcasters are out of touch with what is happening today. How much greater could public media be if these stations had greater support and investment? Herein, NFCB hopes to illustrate how impactful community broadcasters are today, and the potential that exists for even greater service to all Americans.

## How are community broadcasters responding to the coronavirus pandemic?

Community broadcasters have earned a unique trust within communities. This trust comes from years of local engagement and conversation with residents. It is built on what has been noted is the power of public media: public safety, education, and civic responsibility. The pandemic has pressed people in public media to change their ways of thinking and operating. In its conversations with stations, NFCB has noted the following trends in community broadcasting, which are a seismic shift from old viewpoints of this vertical within public broadcasting.

### ***The coronavirus has pressed stations to foster more conversations and trust.***

With the dwindling of print media and the crisis in employment opportunities for journalists in general, these noncommercial radio stations are more crucial than they've ever been. Community radio stations are using their positions of trust during the coronavirus pandemic to be an essential support conduit for citizens' collective hopes, fears and concerns. Stations are also stepping up to counteract dangerous levels of misinformation. Some examples include:

- KZYX (Philo, California) offers several hours each week to emergency room physicians, and with the county's health officer responding to listener questions via live call-ins and email. The station offers coronavirus education in English and Spanish.
- KWMR (Port Reyes Station, California) created a newsletter to get its weekday public affairs program, Epicenter, into listeners' inboxes.
- With an understanding of its Native American audience, KWSO (Warm Springs, Oregon) launched social media and multimedia education around the coronavirus to complement its broadcasts about Tribal issues and the pandemic.
- WTIP (Grand Marais, Minnesota) distributes the coronavirus reporting through a statewide collaboration of community radio stations as well as a remote low-power station 90 miles away and without resources to create its own journalism.
- KRCL (Salt Lake City, Utah) produced the COVID Diaries, a 10-part series exploring the effects of the coronavirus and quarantine on different communities within Utah.
- KTNA (Talkeetna, Alaska) added a Resources for COVID-19 Resilience page to its website so even residents outside the listening area could find services.

- WJFF (Catskill, New York) found itself so overwhelmed by community stories brought on by the pandemic that it created Local Edition, a program dedicated to sharing residents' reflections and experiences.
- KJBU-LP (Oxnard, California) is using its platform, devoted to service to the Black community, to address misinformation about the coronavirus.

***The coronavirus has stimulated collaboration as never before.***

With more people at home and the demand for direct local services spiking across the United States, community radio in rural communities is seeing high demand for their participation from first responders, state agencies and local nonprofits. Radio remains a vital and economical resource for these populations that cannot be replaced by national programming or social media feeds.

- KZUM (Lincoln, Nebraska) partnered with the city's performing arts stakeholders for a spring drive-in concert series aimed at supporting local artists while observing coronavirus pandemic safety measures.
- KCSB (Santa Barbara, California) saw a lack of education for the student body at the University of California-Santa Barbara and launched a newsletter. Produced by students as well as staff, the newsletter shares the latest infection rates and local pandemic news three times a week to 27,000 students and on Saturdays to 9,000 more subscribers in the wider community.
- KTDB (Pine Hill, New Mexico) broadcast the reservation's high school graduation ceremony so families could be part of the event.
- KICI-LP (Iowa City, Iowa) recognized the effect of the pandemic on the state's creative economy. It partnered with the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs for programming aimed at highlighting and supporting music and artistic expression by local performers and those across the state.
- When local cultural events shuttered, WBFY-LP (Belfast, Maine) sprang into action, broadcasting radio theater produced by a local actors' troupe and presenting a monthly radio program in place of a very popular local public dancing event.
- KEMB-LP (Emmetsburg, Iowa) aired live bingo games for four nursing homes and a number of group homes for adults with disabilities, whose constituents could not leave their rooms due to the possibility of coronavirus spread. The non-prize games had been a highlight for players, and the station gave them a chance for relief from isolation.

***The coronavirus has pushed stations to innovate the local access pipeline.***

For generations, community radio leaned in on the idea of live, in-studio broadcasting. The coronavirus has reshaped these stations' approaches. Content and community engagement now center on virtual training and convening. Such initiatives can help break barriers to media access, particularly in historically underrepresented communities. Some examples include:

- KCAW (Sitka, Alaska) created a remote studio for Mt. Edgecumbe High School Radio Club. This school serves primarily indigenous students. Today, the station can broadcast directly from campus.
- KUYI (Kykotsmovi, Arizona) uses Facebook to alert the station's 17,000 followers about Hopi Tribe coronavirus updates and vaccine availability.
- Maine stations WERU and WMPG are collaborating to create statewide coronavirus response programming.
- KAFM (Grand Junction, Colorado) has made its daily Community Affairs Hour an update on coronavirus response locally, featuring city and county leaders.
- WFHB (Bloomington, Indiana) pivoted to remote training and content production during the pandemic. “[We are embarking] on new ways to serve our community.”
- WELT-LP (Fort Wayne, Indiana) utilizes its home base, the Allen County Public Library, to provide education in many languages, including Arabic, Burmese and Spanish.
- As so many of us are dependent on Zoom and remote meetings today, KVRU-LP (Seattle, Washington) has used its new digital training model to teach producers about the importance of Internet access and the affordability of getting online.

**More Concrete Examples of Innovation, Adaptation, and New Services**

**KVMR**

**Nevada City, California**

In June 2020, a listener demand that the station “tell the truth” about the coronavirus blossomed into a news special covering misinformation about masks, vaccines and the pandemic. Since then, the station has continued to address myths, including hosting a range of local officials to educate listeners.

**KMUN**

**Astoria, Oregon**

The station makes council meetings for its hometown as well as nearby towns available to listeners in podcast form, so they can hear in a convenient format how leaders are

responding to the coronavirus. In all, the station's 40 podcasts offer local healthcare groups, nonprofits, and city officials a unique avenue for access to residents. The station supports the podcasts as well as hosting at no cost to creators.

## **WXPR**

### **Rhineland, Wisconsin**

The community radio station and local partners broadcast and YouTube streamed the Home Grown Concert Series, with local musicians performing socially distanced on the Nicolet College stage. The station and college also teamed to present Pandemic Portraits, a mail art project connecting residents through art. Nicolet College shared postcards and encouraged recipients to create a piece of art on the self-addressed stamped envelope and mail it back.

## **KGNU**

### **Boulder, Colorado**

The station launched its Coronavirus in Colorado vertical for local news coverage last year. From school openings to how the state's criminal justice institutions are handling the pandemic in local jails, KGNU has offered diverse reporting with a small staff.

## **KRTS**

### **Marfa, Texas**

Marfa Public Radio has focused its broadcast and digital presence on regional coronavirus education, including a West Texas Coronavirus Tracker on its website, educational on-air content about the available vaccines, and daily coverage of how the state and county are responding to area needs and concerns related to the pandemic.

## **KWLP**

### **Peach Springs, Arizona**

The station carried all Tribal Council meetings live, so the community could remain informed about the coronavirus response despite meetings being closed due to the pandemic. The station distributed 400 small FM radios in the community to ensure those without internet or cellular access could remain informed during the pandemic.

## **Radio Indígena**

### **Oxnard, California**

When the coronavirus pandemic first hit the United States, the hosts of Radio Indígena were among the first people who could explain the coronavirus to indigenous Mexican farmworkers in California's Central Coast, thanks to their ability to switch between Spanish, Mixteco, Zapoteco, Purepecha, Triqui and other indigenous languages. Its community education around the pandemic earned it coverage on CNN.

## **KPOV**

### **Bend, Oregon**

Every weekday since March 2020, dedicated volunteers have created a three-minute daily coronavirus report with the most up-to-date research and news about the global pandemic as well as public service announcements on resources for those in need. It began with a small staff giving random updates in the early days of the pandemic. After a few days, a volunteer suggested writing up the reports from home. A few days after that, volunteers began recording them from home. Now, volunteers write the reports and voice them.

## **KOPN**

### **Columbia, Missouri**

At the start of the pandemic, station leaders realized the need for timely news updates and educational information. A local family physician began broadcasting live for a half-hour every weekday morning to talk about the latest case numbers, testing sites, and health ordinances in effect. Since then, KOPN has had conversations with local elected officials about local policies, broken news about new and changing testing sites, and been a platform for grassroots communication to increase vaccine access in the region.

## **KMRE-LP**

### **Bellingham, Washington**

In April 2020, the station created a series called KMRE Coronavirus Stories, where producers invited the community to explore the impact of the pandemic on the county's residents. Community contributors interview other locals and produce episodes of five to 25 minutes in length.

## **WYAR**

### **Yarmouth, Maine**

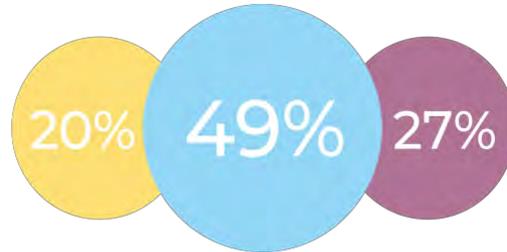
The secular station opened its airwaves so its local church could safely reach its attendees on Sunday mornings. "Many of the church family have restricted access to broadband," the station shared.



*WHCP-LP (Cambridge, Maryland) launched Cambridge Community Conversation as the pandemic worsened in May 2020. The bi-weekly series broadcast on-air and online via Facebook and YouTube. It brought community leaders into the homes of residents, and has featured the County Health Department, County Schools Superintendent and many others.*

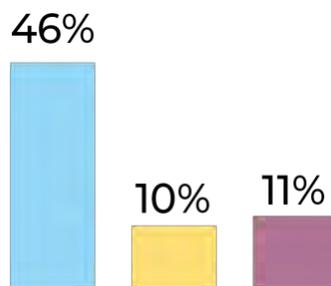
## Station Capacity Data Points

### Stations Dedicating News Coverage to the Coronavirus Pandemic



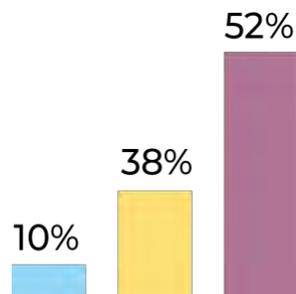
20 percent of stations devote 50 percent or more of news coverage to the pandemic. 27 percent devote 20-50 percent of news programming to covering the pandemic. 49 percent devote focus on the coronavirus in as much as 20 percent of the programming.

### News Production During the Coronavirus Pandemic



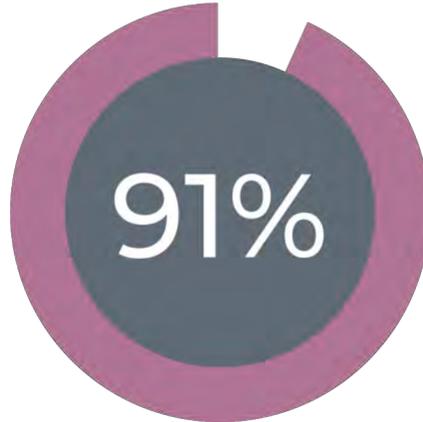
46 percent of stations are producing daily news programming. 10 percent of stations produce at least weekly news programming. Another 11 percent of stations produce monthly news roundups.

### Public Affairs Coverage Dedicated to the Coronavirus Pandemic



10 percent of stations devote 50 percent or more of public affairs coverage to the pandemic. 38 percent devote 20-50 percent of public affairs programming to covering the pandemic. 52 percent devote focus on the coronavirus in as much as 20 percent of the programming.

## Stations Airing Public Service Announcements on the Coronavirus Pandemic



91 percent air coronavirus PSAs.

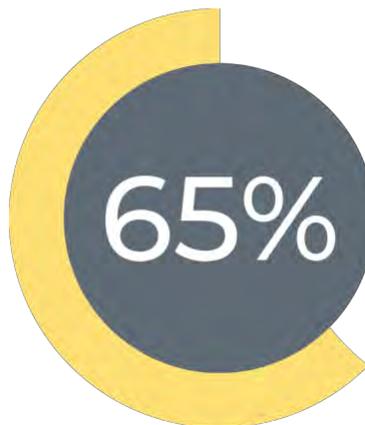
### FREQUENCY

73 percent airing daily PSAs • 17 percent airing at least weekly

### SOURCES

69 percent create PSAs locally • 17 percent collaborate with area and state agencies

## Stations Report Minimal Outside Investment During the Coronavirus Pandemic



65 percent have less than \$1,000 in news funding.

64 percent of stations are producing with one news staffer or less.

23 percent have 1-3 staff members covering the coronavirus pandemic.

## New Priorities for a New Reality

Based on research and interviews, NFCB believes the following priorities must be front and center for all organizations invested in or interested in supporting noncommercial broadcasting in the United States:

- Current and future emergency funding disbursed on the federal level should prioritize rural small-budget broadcasters and stations serving BIPOC communities. The pandemic does not care about economies of scale; in fact, these populations are disproportionately affected in terms of death, hospitalization, and vaccination rates. In "Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention illustrates in an up-to-date fashion the challenges these communities face, which broadcasters can help alleviate.
- More attention and funding should support programming initiatives emanating from rural small-budget broadcasters and stations serving BIPOC communities because they are uniquely connected to the local reality on the ground.
- Funders should ensure more resources come to small-budget broadcasters outside of the Community Service Grant program to support content service and innovation. There is a powerful movement of local media that is not included in the CSG program and is serving communities who are underserved all across the country. This needs to be recognized and understood more deeply.
- Current and future funding disbursed on the federal level should include avenues to evaluate the impact and assist stations outside of the CSG framework whose content priorities meet public media aspirations and objectives.
- A shift away from older perceptions about community radio should be discussed, defined, and communicated systemwide so that there is greater understanding of the significant contributions these stations make to the public media system as a whole.



*Radio Indígena (Oxnard, California) offers coronavirus education in multiple languages indigenous to Mexico.*

## Conclusion

NFCB's latest research indicates that community broadcasting is a rapidly changing space. Small stations have created quality content with fewer resources than larger market enterprises. Many of them do not rely on nationally produced programming because it does not meet local needs. The coronavirus has accelerated audience for live radio and on-demand podcasts particularly with regard to public safety. This is especially true in rural communities where basic infrastructure is strained and local newspapers are no longer present. Radio remains one of the most nimble ways to provide accurate information.

With an evaporation of full-power broadcast spectrum due to the removal of ownership limits, low-power and limited full-power stations are playing a bigger role in rural towns and cities than they may have 30 years ago. Local radio is not equivalent to radio producing locally relevant content. As a result, community broadcasters are being asked to provide lifesaving journalism. Even as headlines of local journalism startups grab attention -- the Google News Initiative's Project Oasis stated in a March 2021 report that the nation had seen a 266 percent surge in new journalism ventures, for example -- such efforts are aimed disproportionately at non-rural areas. Project Oasis, in fact, notes 40 percent of local journalism startups serve cities of one million residents or more, but fails to mention less than 20 such cities exist in the United States, according to the Census.

These changes in the broadcast space and the need for coverage in rural communities press leaders to address the new realities for the noncommercial broadcast system.

Funders have at times eschewed supporting community broadcasters over implicit questions of impact and relevance. NFCB's findings reveal that such biases should be interrogated. Community broadcasters are rising to the occasion, coast to coast, by delivering daily journalism addressing the coronavirus and other emergencies. Their service is necessary and these are constituencies among which funders claim to want to make inroads. This presents an historic opportunity to change a dynamic of inequity and broaden the service that public media provides the nation.

Even amid the coronavirus outbreak, according to the 2021 Infinite Dial report, radio still enjoys the strongest base of all media, including television and streaming. Moreover, today's conversations about polarization, trust in media, and inclusion should remind us that radio is an asset for positive change. FM broadcasters still have solid connections among BIPOC audiences. Community broadcasters are in places where their journalism is needed most. Greater support can only make their service even stronger.