

Institute for Nonprofit News

Seeking a Cure: Accomplishments, impact and areas for improvement

Introduction

When a half dozen members of the Institute for Nonprofit News all reported healthcare was a top editorial priority for them, it quickly became clear that it would be a fruitful area for collaboration. When the team at Iowa Watch pitched a story about the crisis in rural healthcare to INN's Amplify News Project team, a project was born.

The [Seeking a Cure collaboration](#) examined challenges facing community hospitals in rural areas across the Midwest in the face of financial and regulatory pressure and changing patterns of health care delivery. It was also the first editorial collaboration from Amplify, which is focused on improving editorial collaboration and content distribution to advance the nonprofit news field.

Stories from Seeking a Cure, which launched on Sept. 30, were published by 126 unique outlets across 32 states and in 18 national/niche outlets. In addition, three presidential candidates and several online communities, such as [r/news](#) on Reddit with over 19,000,000 members, also amplified the story.

How did we find this data?

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of the Institute for Nonprofit News. We also did searches for “rural hospitals” and “seeking a cure” to round out our results.

For social distribution, we searched each story on the hospitals.iowawatch.org landing site and on each outlet's website. Using the [CrowdTangle browser extension](#), we were able to see where this story appeared on social media sites, checking a week after the launch of the project.

For collaborators' feedback, we sent out a Google Form and requested specific data from a participant at each organization. All partners but one filled out the form. The editor from Minnesota Public Radio retired shortly after the collaboration and was unable to provide feedback.

Why did we do this collaboration?

We believe that collaboration can help lead to greater attention, reach and impact. And by bringing journalists together, we help create a bigger pot of resources to tell complex stories in a detailed and responsible way. We also want people to have access to information that is critical to their lives. And we want nonprofit newsrooms to have as few barriers to entry as possible for editorial collaborations, so we're here to help. For more, read [our blog post here](#).

How did we do this collaboration?

This project started as a pitch from reporter [Jennifer Hemmingsen](#) to [Iowa Center for Public Affairs Reporting](#). Iowa Watch's Lyle Muller knew that Amplify was looking for pitches for regional collaboration, and suggested her project to INN.

Once we determined there was a cohort of members interested in the project, the collaboration moved in phases, starting in summer 2019. The project published on Sept. 30 after months of work.

The phases of the project:

- Identify and reach out to potential members
- Arrange regular Zoom meetings with partners
- Agree on communication protocol and tools
- Prepare, reach agreement and sign MOU outlining terms of partnership
- Reach consensus on title and logo
- Draft editorial calendar
- Create distribution plan
- Create social media and promotion plan
- Share content with distribution partners
- Publish

All of the initial stories in the collaboration but one — one from Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting — were published on Sept. 30. MCIR, while involved in the collaboration, will be publishing their story independently in January 2020 due to capacity limitations.

How was this collaboration funded?

The rural hospitals project was funded by INN's Amplify News Project and the project partners, with additional funding from the Solutions Journalism Network. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded by generous support from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Joyce Foundation.

Distribution results: Reach

Content distribution

For the 11 stories that were published in the package (some of which were a partnership between two newsrooms, i.e. an audio and text package), we found that 126 unique outlets across 32 states and 18 national outlets recirculated at least one story. For our purposes, recirculation means republishing the story in full or linking to a story on another media site, sharing a story on social media or sharing through a newsletter.

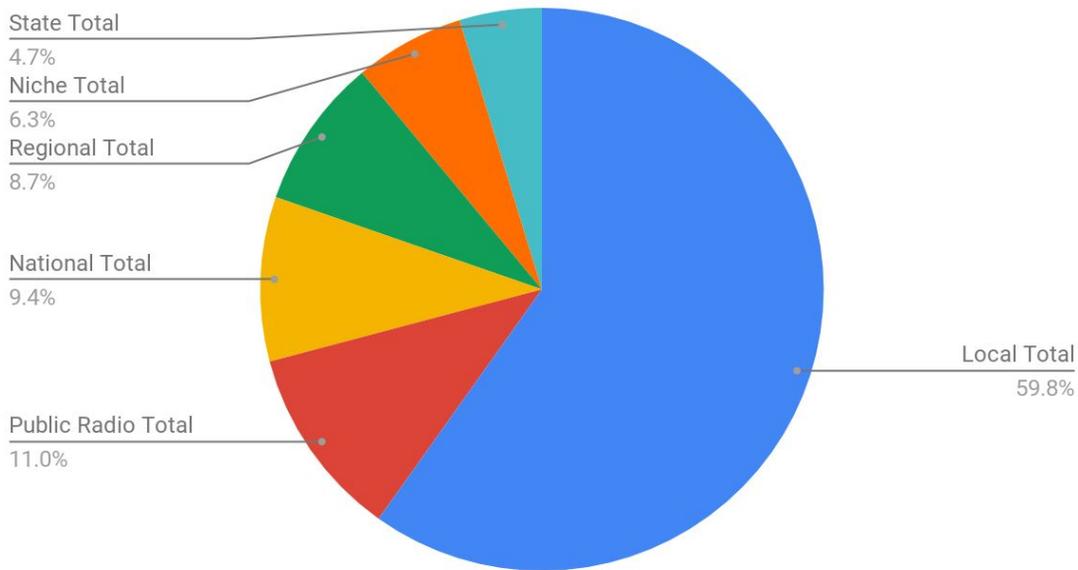
Out of the 159 times content from the rural hospitals collaboration was recirculated, an outlet republished a story 155 times; a story was included in an aggregated newsletter once (from Kaiser Health News); three stories appeared in a national aggregation site, Noovel; and there were six publicity stories about the collaboration, which included sharing a link to the series, from journalism organizations such as [Nieman Lab](#) and [American Press Institute](#).

Unsurprising given its focus, content was recirculated most in the Midwest — 71 out of 159 recirculations, or about 44%, were from outlets in the Midwest. Surprisingly, Connecticut was the state with the most recirculations with 18, followed by Iowa with 16, Illinois with 16 and Wisconsin with 12.

This collaboration served primarily local outlets across the U.S. — about 66% of total recirculation. Twelve national outlets recirculated a rural hospital story — the Associated Press, CityLab, Heavy.com, In These Times, Noovell, On the News Now, Route Fifty, Salon.com, UnDark Magazine, UPI.com, USA News Hub and Yahoo News.

Eight niche outlets (many of which have a national audience) recirculated a rural hospital story — AgUpdate, Agrinews-Pubs.com, Education News, Kaiser Health News, Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, Naked Capitalism, The Daily Yonder and Truth Out.

Recirculated content by type of media outlet



Using Meltwater, we can estimate the number of unique visitors to a website per month. The sites that recirculated content from the partnership have a total monthly audience of close to 1 billion unique visitors. While it's certain that nowhere near that many people saw these stories, even 1/10th of 1% of that audience would mean one million people could have seen the story.

[The breakdown](#) of where these stories were distributed is below. A note for clarification: Side Effects, one of our rural hospital partners, is itself a collaboration of stations based out of WFYI in Indiana. In the chart, it's noted that KBIA and Iowa Public Radio produced stories under the Side Effects partnership.

(To see more detail from each outlet and its location, click into the "Breakdown by story" tab in the spreadsheet):

Story	Outlet	# of unique outlets that recirculated	# of unique states where the story was recirculated
How one small Wisconsin hospital was saved amid a	Wisconsin Watch	58	20

statewide rural health crisis			
Series page (hospitals.iowawatch.org)	Iowa Watch	1	1
Immersion program gives future doctors a taste of Missouri's rural life	KBIA for Side Effects	6	5
Rural Wisconsin communities seek paths to better health care future	Wisconsin Watch	6	3
Overview	Iowa Watch	9	7
To preserve access, a Minnesota town keeps hospital on life support	Minnesota Public Radio	5	5
Rural hospital closures in the context of broader health care crisis	The Conversation	34	11
Rural Iowa's dwindling options for maternal care	Iowa Public Radio for Side Effects	8	4
Iowa rural hospitals make tough choices to stay lean, provide needed care	Iowa Watch, IPA, etc.	20	12
Iowa community invests in the future of rural health	N'West Iowa REVIEW	2	1
Rural Iowa hospital adopts an entrepreneurial approach	Iowa Falls Times Citizen	2	1
How a rural hospital	KCUR	6	5

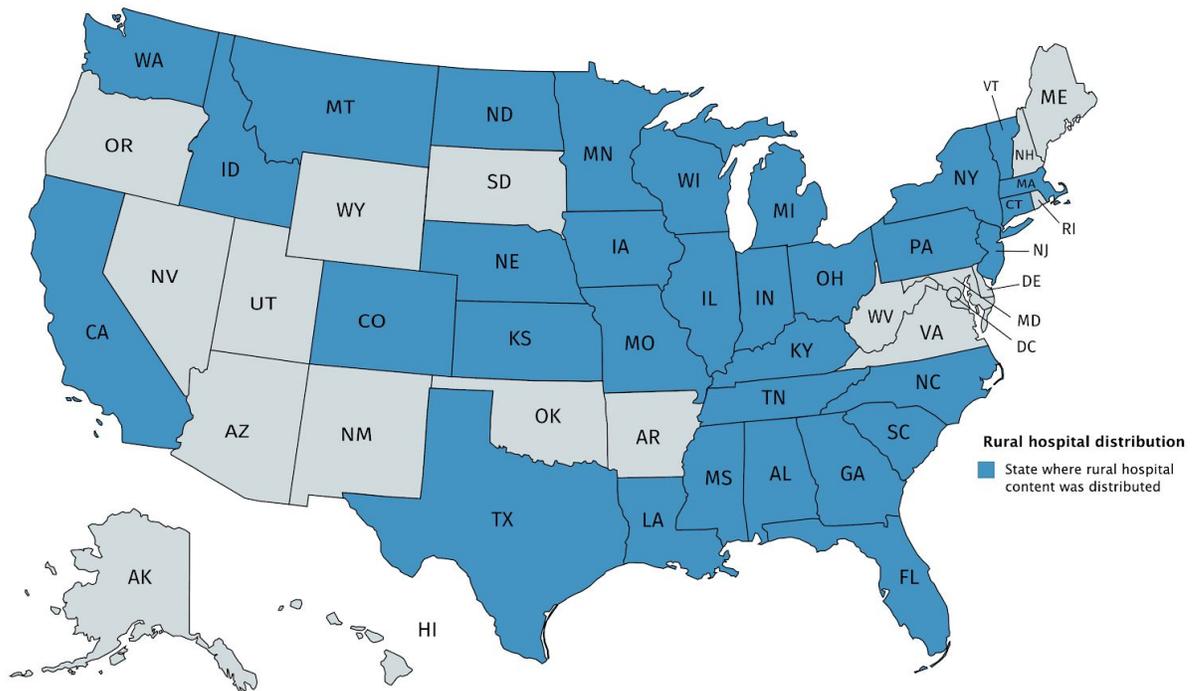
in Kansas survived multiple owners and bankruptcy			
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While we did not ask outlets to estimate pageviews, Wisconsin Watch estimates that 16.7 million people clicked on a story it published as part of this collaboration. The five radio features received a total of 1,591 views on the WFYI and Side Effects websites. The most popular on the WFYI site was (IPR's) "Why Rural Hospitals Keep Closing Maternity Wards" with 883 views. From independent research in LexisNexis, Side Effects estimates its story could have a total potential reach of 19.7 million, based on site traffic. Iowa Public Radio estimates 4,600 pageviews combined from recirculating all public radio stories on their site.

The Iowa collaboration (the "Iowa rural hospitals make tough choices to stay lean, provide needed care" story with multiple Iowa outlets involved in reporting) got the most recirculation in Iowa, likely due to the partnership network IowaWatch already has established in the state. The same goes for the "How one small Wisconsin hospital was saved amid a statewide rural health crisis" story from Wisconsin Watch; This story also got significant pickup through our pre-established Amplify-AP partnership. The story from The Conversation did well for a few reasons: It, too, has an expansive pre-established distribution network, including its own partnership with the AP, and the story was one of the most broad and relevant to a national audience.

Most of the recirculations were from non-INN members: Only seven INN members recirculated a rural hospital story. Bridge Magazine, In These Times, Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, The Daily Yonder, Side Effects, KCUR and WFYI all republished at least one story on their site. Of those members, only In These Times — a national outlet based in Chicago — and The Daily Yonder — which covers rural issues — are not part of the Amplify News Project. KCUR and WFYI, through Side Effects, were part of the rural hospital collaboration.

Within the collaboration itself, only certain outlets shared stories from the partners. The Gazette created a series page on its site and republished relevant stories from Iowa-based outlets. Iowa Falls Times republished the overview story from Iowa Watch and The Times Citizen story. Wisconsin Watch and Bridge both provided a link to the series on a site page. Iowa Public Radio aired all of the radio partners' stories, and posted web versions to their site, and shared them through social media; Side Effects Public Media and Wisconsin Public Radio shared all of the public radio-specific stories from the collaboration as well.



Created with mapchart.net ©

WILL, a public radio station in Illinois, shared the most stories through the rural health collaboration — five — with TheGazette.com and Iowa Public Radio following at three each. No outlet recirculated every story in the collaboration, which makes sense as many of these stories are location-specific.

Social media distribution

Combining the followers/subscribers for these 84 accounts, at least one story from this collaboration could have reached 75,677,462 people through social distribution.

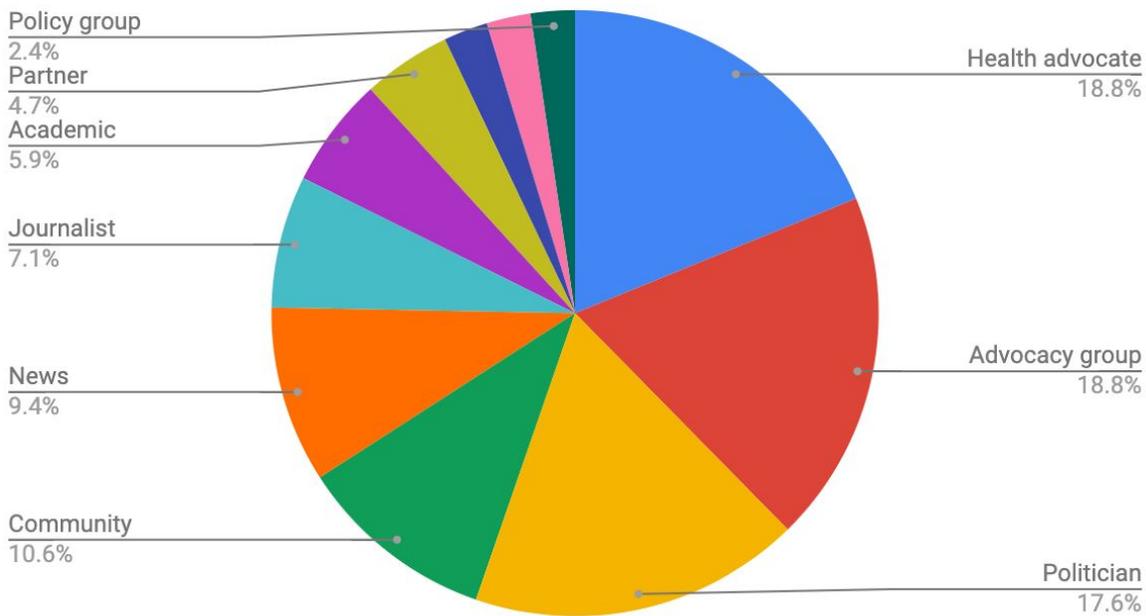
Promotion, both for stories that individual outlets produced, came from all partners, including INN and Amplify accounts. Amplify promoted the series through a [Twitter campaign](#), which reached over 7,000 users, according to Twitter analytics.

Partners engaged in their own social campaigns on a voluntary basis. Side Effects aggressively promoted the series on social media, starting on Sept. 30 and ending on Oct. 9. Their posts drove users to our “Seeking A Cure” page, which highlights the collaboration led by INN and IowaWatch, and includes a link to all stories. Below is a sample Facebook post from Side Effects, which ran a similar promotion on Twitter:

From [Oct. 2](#) — “Trapped under antiquated policies and infrastructure in communities with dwindling populations, some rural hospitals cannot afford to adapt to a rapidly evolving health care system. From a series on rural hospital closures, read more stories here: <https://www.sideeffectspublicmedia.org/.../seeking-cure-quest...>”

[Iowa Watch](#) and [Iowa Public Radio](#) also ran heavy social media campaigns to promote the collaboration. Iowa Public Radio shared all radio partner stories on social media, estimating about 18,000 impressions from the campaign on Twitter and about 6,500 people reached on Facebook. On Facebook, the “Rural Iowa's Dwindling Options For Maternal Care” story had an 11.3% engagement rate.

Social media stakeholders for rural hospitals collaboration



Politicians also posted on social media about this collaboration. We reached three presidential candidates: Minnesota Senator [Amy Klobuchar](#); South Bend, Indiana [Mayor Pete Buttigieg](#); and Montana Governor [Steve Bullock](#) all shared the series on Twitter. Iowa Congressman Bob Kressig, state senator Bill Dotzler, former state representative Helen Miller, Senate Democratic Leader [Janet Petersen](#), State Senator Pam Jochum and State Senator Joe Bolckom shared at

least one story from the series on Twitter. Wisconsin state senator Jeff Smith and Wisconsin State Representative John Nygren also shared at least one story on social.

And the series reached folks running for office, too: Barbara Barry, running for Connecticut State Senate and Sarah Trone Garriott, a candidate for Iowa State Senate, both shared parts of the series.

Health advocates — such as [Iowa Hospital Association](#), [Kansas Hospital Association](#), [Marshfield Clinic](#), [National Association of County and City Health Officials](#), [Navigant Healthcare](#), [Rural Health Info Hub](#) and [Wisconsin Hospital Association](#) — did the most social media sharing, representing about 20 percent of social distribution. Advocacy groups, including [CFPC Iowa](#), [Enact Universal Healthcare for California](#), [NARAL Pro-Choice Iowa](#), [NRHA Advocacy](#), [Planned Parenthood Texas Votes](#), [Rural Policy Learning Commons](#) and [West Virginia Citizen Action Group](#), furthered the reach of the collaboration.

A surprising find: While news communities and journalists themselves — such as the [Urban Institute](#), journalist Barb Shelly and r/news — shared this collaboration on social media, not many from within the collaboration did the same. Only Iowa Public Radio, Iowa Watch and Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting shared the collaboration (not including the story the outlets themselves produced) on social platforms.

Additional Reach

While we are not aware of measurable actions that have yet been taken because of this collaboration, we weren't necessarily expecting that to happen immediately — rural health is a crisis across the country, and our goal was to bring attention to the specific problems and solutions facing the Midwest.

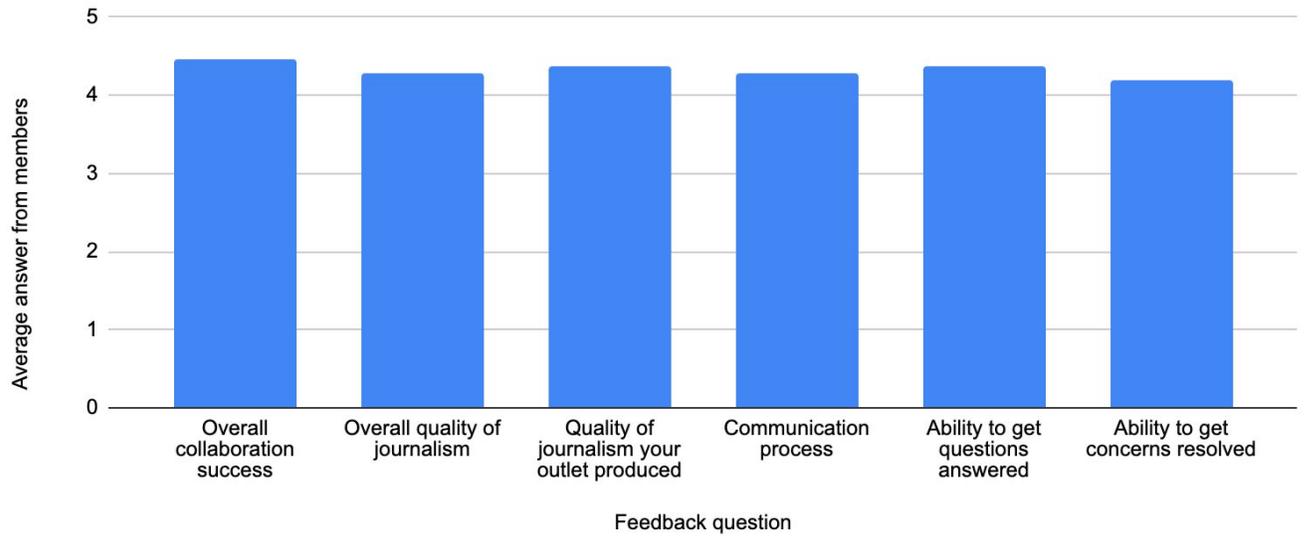
However, the reporting project did appear to capture the interest of public officials as demonstrated by the social reach, mentioned above. Additionally, The Gazette (Cedar Rapids, IA) included rural hospital issues in a broader [Iowa Ideas Conference](#) held on Oct. 3-4. Topics covered included rural health and telemedicine, oral health access, rural access centers and children's mental health. A portion of an on-stage interview with Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds was devoted to rural health access issues in the state and referenced reporting from the collaboration.

Collaboration feedback

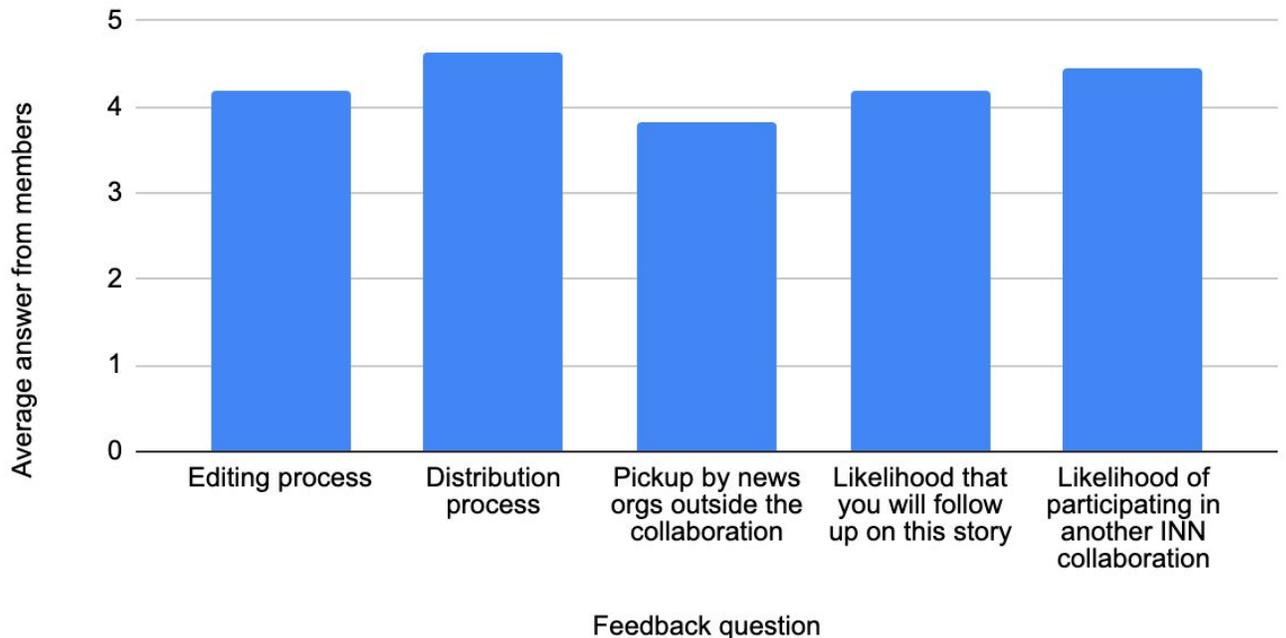
Because this was Amplify's first editorial collaboration, we wanted to test our methods of collaboration. Jennifer Hemmingsen was the project manager for the collaboration, and INN

staff member Sharon McGowan was the collaborations leader. Through our feedback form, we asked the partners to rank their experiences from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on different aspects of the project management, from quality of journalism produced to the editing process to likelihood of participating in an INN collaboration in the future. A breakdown of what we found:

Average feedback from members, part one (1 is poor; 5 is excellent)



Average feedback from members, part two (1 is poor; 5 is excellent)



Generally very positive feedback on how the collaboration was managed. The average responses from 11 of our editorial partners:

Overall success of this collaboration for your newsroom: 4.45

Quality of journalism overall: 4.27

Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom: 4.36

Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.): 4.27

Ability to get questions answered: 4.36

Ability to get concerns resolved: 4.18

Editing process: 4.18

Distribution process: 4.64

Pickup by news organizations outside the collaboration: 3.82

Likelihood that you will follow up on this story: 4.18

Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future: 4.45

The results indicate that an increased focus on outside pickup could make sense in the future.

Observations for the future

Because this was our first collaborative effort, of course there's room to improve. Some observations:

- Based on the results of recirculation efforts and trends in this story at a national level, another round of collaborative reporting focused on the South could be interesting.
- In order to increase the likelihood that these collaborations will have impact, creating a distribution list of elected officials and candidates is going to be helpful moving forward.
- Additionally, it would be helpful to be more intentional about impact from the planning phase — what are our collective goals for the project and how can we craft a package of stories that help achieve those outcomes?
- Partners should be strongly encouraged to 1) share the collaboration on their social platforms; 2) republish relevant work from other collaboration members.
- In order to start wider INN member conversations and/or to help recirculation efforts within the nonprofit news space, it would be helpful to post these collaborations on the INN listserv, which is the primary place for conversations among members at this time.