



**PEER LEARNING +
COLLABORATION FUND**

OKLAHOMA CITY

2020 REPORTING GRANTS

REPORT PREPARED BY
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EDITED BY
CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center was founded in 2012 in response to the downsizing of New Jersey news organizations and the changes in the ownership of regional public media. These shifts in the news and information landscape hurt the volume of local news available in a state that has historically had limited news coverage, due to its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia.

The Center coordinates statewide and regional reporting, connecting more than 330 local news and information providers through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons. The Commons helps partners to share content and encourages them to collaborate and to support one another.

The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices, focusing on local journalism, business models, and ecosystem mapping. The Center convenes national programs, including an annual national summit for journalism organizations to foster the conditions, ideas, and practices that lead to stronger collaborative journalism across the U.S.

The Center is a grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. The Center receives operational support from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Abrams Foundation, as well as project support from several other grantmaking sources and sponsors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Heide Brandes is an award-winning journalist and writer based in Oklahoma City. She regularly contributes to numerous regional, national and international publications and is a member of the Society for Professional Journalists, the North American Travel Journalists Association, the Society for American Travel Writers, the International Writers and Editors Association and more.

ABOUT THE PEER LEARNING + COLLABORATION FUND

The Peer Learning + Collaboration Fund is an initiative launched in 2019 to support peer learning among journalists and foster collaborative news efforts in U.S. cities. The Peer Fund is facilitated by the Center and supported by Democracy Fund.

The Peer Fund has three distinct parts; the first is to support peer-to-peer learning in the U.S. by funding travel for journalists and prioritizing people of color, women, and those who identified as having a high financial need. In the era of COVID-19, this travel funding was reconfigured and the Peer Fund began to support virtual collaboration in the second half of 2020.

The second part of the Peer Fund comprises “Share + Learn” events, which aim to bring large groups of people together who are all interested in peer learning with and from a single organization or individual.

The last part of the Peer Fund is made up of ecosystem workshops, which were hosted in three U.S. cities in 2019 and 2020: Cleveland, Oklahoma City and Newark, N.J. The ecosystem workshops aimed to gather local journalists and mediamakers for a daylong retreat to discuss the local news ecosystem and inspire collaborative efforts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The news ecosystem in Oklahoma City seemed ripe for collaboration when the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University began work there in mid-2019. The metro area was served by several newspaper, nonprofit, independent and broadcast media organizations, and an active journalism funder, the Inasmuch Foundation, was interested in strengthening local journalism. Such outlets as Oklahoma Watch, Big If True, and the Oklahoma Gazette had already been actively collaborating.

Collaborative journalism can help journalists reach new audiences, increase their impact, learn new skills, access new resources, and diversify sources and perspectives. Collaboration is necessary to support healthy news ecosystems, but it takes time to develop the kind of relationships and trust needed to execute collaborative projects well. Seeding one-off collaborative reporting projects is one way the Center has found to help news organizations start the process of learning how to work together.

In Oklahoma City, the Center worked with the Inasmuch Foundation to fund five such projects. Three of the five collaborative reporting projects that were supported by Peer Learning + Collaboration Fund grants were successful when measured by how closely the journalism matched the original idea and the experience of the participants. Two struggled, mostly because of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic that were out of their hands. It's important to note that the three projects that finished most closely to the original plan all involved at least one partner organization that had previous experience in collaborative journalism.

Although the pandemic created havoc for most of the organizations involved, nearly all said the cooperation and collaboration was of value.

In hindsight, the Center could have done better by providing on-the-ground support during the initial grant period, which ran January to June 2020, and hiring a local project coordinator. Additionally, it's likely that a story visioning session hosted a few weeks after the initial retreat would have helped develop each group's plans more fully so they each could have hit the ground running in January.

BACKGROUND

In November 2019, the Center for Cooperative Media, in partnership with Inasmuch Foundation, hosted a workshop for mediamakers and journalism professionals in Oklahoma City's media ecosystem.

The workshop brought together about 50 local journalists and funders for a day of discussion about what makes for a healthy news ecosystem, what the components were of Oklahoma City's ecosystem, and how collaboration could help improve local journalism. At the end of the event a grant opportunity was announced for all participants, thanks to generous funding from the Inasmuch Foundation.

The grants were part of the [Peer Learning + Collaboration Fund](#). The money directed toward Oklahoma was intended to build cooperation and collaboration among local news organizations, allowing for deeper investigations and reporting into matters that were important to the community.

In January, the Center awarded five collaborative reporting project grants to Oklahoma news organizations totaling more than \$40,000.

"The collaboration grants directly led to excellent journalism and powerful stories by the media partners," said Tyler Tokarczyk, program officer for Inasmuch Foundation. "Beyond those stories, the retreat and grants formed a foundation for the Oklahoma Media Center, a statewide journalism collaborative focused on reporting and business transformation. As resources available for local news continue to diminish, it will take more collaborative efforts like these to keep our community engaged and informed."

The grants allowed Oklahoma journalists to work together to delve deep into such topics as homelessness, domestic abuse, evictions, and the challenges of restaurant employees. For many of the news organizations, the collaborative process went smoothly; for others, challenges arose.

In all cases, the COVID-19 pandemic added an unknown element that affected each project in its own way. All of the collaborative efforts were supposed to have been finished by June 2020; in at least one case, due to the pandemic, the project was just finally underway at the writing of this report in December 2020.

Each project and its outcomes are explored below.

Domestic Violence in the Hispanic Community

Partners: The Daily Oklahoman, Tyler Media, and Telemundo

A grant to The Oklahoman, Tyler Media and Telemundo allowed the three media agencies to explore cases of domestic violence within the growing Hispanic community in Oklahoma City, with a goal of raising awareness about how crimes could be reported safely.

“We would like to launch a series that will be co-reported by the newsrooms,” Kelly Fry, editor of The Oklahoman, wrote in the project’s application. “It will include print, video and digital and possibly outdoor signage. The project will be to raise the level of awareness within the Hispanic community that domestic violence needs to be reported. We believe it is under-reported out of fear of deportation.”

“We want to host an event that will bring resources under one roof so the Hispanic community can gain an understanding of help that is available,” Fry also wrote. “We will use the funds to secure a site and help defray costs. We will also offer speakers and panel discussions from local experts and law enforcement.”

But the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to the planned event. The biggest portion of the funding the group received had been dedicated to hosting the community gathering, but instead the partners chose to use the money to create brochures and educational material about domestic abuse to distribute throughout the community.

“The grant was for us to do a series of articles on domestic violence in the Hispanic community,” Fry said. “We still have plans to tackle that. We could still do a virtual event, but we didn’t feel that would have as big of an impact. Instead, we created materials about domestic abuse for use in the community.”

Journalists at Telemundo and Tyler Media are also working on the series.

“We are still in the process of collaborating with The Oklahoman,” said Cecilia Hernandez-Cromwell, news director and anchor at Telemundo Oklahoma City and Tulsa. “We have interviewed around six people already, but there are some more interviews we are interested in obtaining.”

The series is in its final stages and set to publish in mid-February. The media partners plan to release a three-part series for the Oklahoman, paired with three corresponding Telemundo broadcast segments. Stories and videos will also be made available online.

Fry said that all the partners had collaborated well on the project but that more breaking and important news had caused the project to take a back seat. In addition, The Oklahoman had a series of furloughs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a delay in the project.

“We plan to do the series now that my reporters are back from furlough,” Fry said. “It’s been quite challenging lately with furloughs, COVID, protests, Trump in Tulsa, and an election. But I believe we are catching our breath and can tackle this topic.”

Restaurant Realities

Partners: Oklahoma Gazette and NonDoc

Restaurant work is notorious for long hours and low pay, and as the national conversation about a living wage and raising the minimum wage continues, the restaurant industry is on the front lines. This project aimed to examine facets of the Oklahoma City restaurant industry in an effort to tell compelling human interest stories in a subculture often hidden from the broader public.

However, the pandemic and the closing of one of the partner's offices created challenges that were hard to overcome. In March, the Oklahoma Gazette laid off its initial editor for the project, the reporter who was working on the project, and the majority of its staff. It also announced at least a three-week printing hiatus, but relaunched later in the year.

"We laid off half the staff and stopped printing in March," said Pete Brzycki, publisher of the Oklahoma Gazette. "All our advertisers started pulling out, and all the arts and entertainment that we heavily cover were closed. The restaurants were closed. In order to survive, we had to cut back our staff and cease operations."

That closing was the biggest challenge for NonDoc as well, said Tres Savage, executive editor of NonDoc.

"The topic was also upended by the pandemic, and the exact focus had to change because we had to focus on new issues in the industry," he said. "We were kind of left alone to do it."

Savage said his publication produced three articles between March and May on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Oklahoma's restaurant industry. In addition, NonDoc published three additional articles tangentially related to the topic during that same time. The three main articles included:

- [COVID-19: A buzz-kill for state's bars and restaurants](#)
- [OKC restaurants pin survival hopes on federal program](#)
- ['A tough decision': Some Oklahoma businesses reopen](#)

"While it is true the Gazette did not co-publish (and we did not co-brand) any of these stories owing to their suspension of operations, I do feel like we did our best to examine the proposed topic in an appropriate lens of the times," Savage said. "At the same time,

we were focusing on the health care side of the pandemic and the ongoing spring state legislative session.”

Savage said he felt the idea of collaboration sounded good on the surface but could easily become too complicated if the publications were not as equally invested.

“We did our due diligence on this, and we did the best we could during the pandemic,” Savage said.

When the Gazette resumed operations later in the year, Brzycki said his former editor reached out to work on the project. Savage said his publication had already run the series of articles on its own.

“I ended up [doing an article](#) in which we focused on three different restaurant groups and how they handled the COVID situation,” Brzycki said.

Despite the non-collaboration, Brzycki said he would welcome additional opportunities to collaborate in the future.

“Generally, it was an agreeable experience” he said. “I think collaboration is a great way to bring individual strengths together.”

Always on the move: How evictions in Oklahoma City and Tulsa create unstable housing and high rates of student mobility

Partners: [The Frontier](#) and [The Curbside Chronicle](#)

The Frontier, a digital media nonprofit corporation operated by The Frontier Media Group Inc., and The Curbside Chronicle, Oklahoma's first and only street paper, aimed to take an in-depth look at evictions and its impact on school mobility.

“When we applied, we wanted to see if there was any correlation between evictions and student mobility,” said Ben Felder, senior staff writer for The Frontier. “Both rates are really high in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

“Our original intent was to use the grant funding beyond just normal production. We wanted to find a few families and use intimate storytelling, not just for an article, but for video and audio. We wanted to embed with families and with the schools.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, the two news organizations had to shift gears.

“When the schools were shutting down due to COVID, our ability to get inside schools was taken away and so was the opportunity to kind of embed with families,” Felder said. “So we thought we would wait until August when the schools opened again. Of course, that didn’t happen with schools opening in a normal way.”

Instead, the journalists focused on using the funding to collect data and produce multimedia production storytelling in the form of infographics and interactive graphics.

“We ended up using the money to go toward multimedia production storytelling, into doing a special presentation page with some really high-level interactive graphics,” Felder said. “We wanted to do something you might see in The New York Times, because we felt like the story was still going to be good. We just didn’t think the storytelling aspect would be quite as good as we’d originally hoped.”

Both organizations produced [interactive presentations and infographics](#) based on the data collected. Because The Frontier is a digital platform instead of a print publication, like The Curbside Chronicle, the end projects were slightly different.

But both organizations did find value in working together.

“It was worth the effort to see our work meet a potentially new audience,” said Nathan Poppe, editor for The Curbside Chronicle. “Pushing good storytelling forward together was great to see.”

Felder also found value in the process.

“It was helpful to be able to diversify our conversations around what would be the best way to present the story,” Felder said. “I think the beauty of what we were able to do as a publication like ours and a magazine like Curbside was we had room to breathe and we had room to be flexible. With the collaboration, there was no real challenge with that.”

Point-in-time counts: Crunching the numbers behind Oklahoma City's snapshot of homelessness

Partners: [The Curbside Chronicle](#), [Oklahoma Gazette](#), and [Big If True](#)

This collaborative project was designed to examine Oklahoma City's 2020 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count and provide in-depth reporting with a goal to spread greater awareness and understanding of homelessness in Oklahoma City.

In January, The Curbside Chronicle invited a photographer and a writer from the Oklahoma Gazette, as well as Mollie Bryant, co-founder of Big If True, to join them for the daylong PIT Count. The first story was meant to act as a behind-the-scenes view of the count and ran on the [cover of the Gazette](#) in January and online at [Big If True](#). That same story was updated for the July issue of The Curbside Chronicle and ran alongside the results of the PIT Count.

A print insert about the PIT Count was also printed inside the Gazette.

For Bryant, the process came naturally. She has been collaborating with media entities, including the Gazette, for some time.

"Last year for about seven months or something, I shared office space with the Gazette, and we collaborated on multiple stories during that time," Bryant said. "So, we had a pretty collaborative relationship."

The project did feel the effects of COVID-19 when the pandemic hit. For one, the Gazette had to lay off half its staff in March and cease printing for several months. Bryant also shifted her focus to pull in more reporting about how the pandemic affected the homeless in Oklahoma City.

"For our second story, I wanted to write something that was about COVID, the impact it was having at the time locally," she said. "We did a story that was basically in response to COVID that focused on affordable housing and how that was being affected. In response to COVID, we had to be a little bit more flexible."

Rayna Forgotson, director of The Curbside Chronicle for the Homeless Alliance, noted that Big If True had written a story exploring the [disruption of Section 8 housing vouchers due to COVID](#) and the growing demand for them. Curbside was able to connect Bryant to a Curbside vendor in the middle of the voucher process to highlight a personal example. That ran online on Big If True and online via the Gazette in May. It also ran in the May issue of the Curbside Chronicle.

The project did have singular challenges. According to Nathan Poppe, editor for The Curbside Chronicle, the Gazette closure delayed the project.

“Also, once the original editor left, we weren’t able to reconnect to see if the Gazette had interest in running the final story in the series, but it did run in Curbside and Big If True,” he said.

“The funds we received were extremely helpful and made working together even easier,”

Pete Brzycki said. The Gazette was able to publish the article and graphics before COVID caused them to close shop for three months.

“With the homeless population, Curbside has insight that no one on our staff or any freelancer could have,” he said. “Mollie is used to doing deep-dive investigative journalism, but one of our challenges is that we work on a tight weekly cycle. That’s always a challenge in doing in-depth projects over a long period of time. It was good to work with outside agencies who can take a little more time.”

Bryant said that she felt the collaboration had been successful and that she was eager to continue collaborating.

“I think that it saves effort, it saves manpower, it saves time, it saves money and it increases the size of your audience,” Bryant said. “It introduces you to new audiences that you might not have before. One thing that was pretty valuable is that Curbside Chronicle is obviously a street paper. Their focus is homelessness and all of the different people in the community, and we’re working to address that issue. It was so cool to work with them from that angle because they have this rich network of sources that I could tap into through collaborating on this project.”

Troubled City

Partners: Oklahoma Watch and KGOU Radio

In what Oklahoma Watch Executive Editor Mike Sherman called “God’s work,” this collaborative project examined mental health calls to Oklahoma City police, which have dramatically increased over the last several years. The initial idea was to put an emphasis on reporting how the struggle to address mental illness is playing out on the streets and affecting the lives of citizens and the police officers who are often the first responders.

This project started with Oklahoma Watch Executive Editor David Fritze, KGOU Radio General Manager Dick Pryor, Oklahoma Watch reporter Whitney Bryen and StateImpact Oklahoma reporter Quinton Chandler. Later, the team was joined by StateImpact Oklahoma Managing Editor Logan Layden and Oklahoma Watch Executive Editor Mike Sherman.

While the different entities often share stories, the grant provided the opportunity to collaborate on a single project together.

“Working together on this data-driven project expanded StateImpact Oklahoma’s editorial capacity and brought a different set of eyes and approach to the reporting,” Pryor said. “Moreover, as manager for KGOU and StateImpact Oklahoma, I like this kind of collaborative effort because it allows the partnering organizations to build on their professional relationship and cross-promote through their individual media channels.

“And, we can also use this project in communication with potential funders as an example of the kind of collaborative work we have done and desire to do to provide important journalism in Oklahoma. Especially in a small state like Oklahoma, we believe having strong relationships with other like-minded journalism organizations is crucial to serving our audience in the best manner possible. “

The reporters on the project said collaboration had made the process both easier and more difficult.

“It was great to have another perspective in Quentin, especially for me,” Bryen said. “I talked to Quentin regularly about the project and we had long conversations. We had two people sifting through records, and in that way, I feel like we covered a little bit more ground.”

The team said the effort was coming together well until COVID hit. The in-depth collaborative investigation soon took a backseat to more pressing, breaking news.

“We both had to take a step back for a minute,” Bryen said. “I think both of the organizations were very much on board for that. That definitely did create some hiccups, like deciding when we pick it back up and giving us the time to focus on it. Finding that time was challenging.”

As with any cross-disciplinary project, there was a learning curve to address related to the different work styles, experiences and needs of the two organizations and their reporters.

“It takes time to learn each other’s approach to stories and how they determine when the story is ‘done,’” Pryor said. “Also, creating a written story for online distribution that works effectively as a radio story and satisfies the editorial standards of each organization was a hurdle to be cleared. Initial plans included doing video segments, but this became difficult to accomplish.”

Another challenge was that leadership at Oklahoma Watch changed in the middle of the project, Sherman said. COVID also created difficulties in planned police ride-alongs and the ability to meet and do face-to-face interviews, and the end vision of the project changed.

Oklahoma Watch published three separate text stories on its website and on StateImpact, KGOU and KOSU websites. The three different text stories had numerous photos embedded, two video pieces that were published within the article, as well as three graphics, Bryen said. They included:

- [Oklahoma City Mental Health Emergencies Outpace Police Trained To Handle Them](#)
- [What Happens When Oklahoma City Police Respond to Mental Health Crises](#)
- [How to Bring Care to Mental Health Emergencies](#)

“Then we also had an audio piece that ran on [KGOU’s StateImpact](#) segment,” she said. “I believe it ran on KOSU as well, and on the websites.”

Sherman said: “I do think it’s imperative that we do some more stuff like this. We all need to learn how to collaborate better, and you learn by doing, If I had to do it again, I think I might tap some people on the shoulder who have done this before and ask what were their successes and what were their problems.”



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