

# CIVIC MEDIA with Chalkbeat & Votebeat

## An Overview on Scaling Sustainable Local Journalism

Americans' ability to find common ground and solve complex problems in their communities has never been more in question. Yet local news businesses that fulfill community information needs are in decline. The solution? **Civic Media**, a scaled local news nonprofit designed to activate and quickly grow the largest available opportunity for significant investment – **local philanthropy, combined with a national advertising network** – by leaning into opportunities provided by media's digital transformation.

### The Current State of Local News

Serving Americans' civic information needs requires the production and distribution of original reporting. For decades, newspapers were the most reliable and robust providers, but they are deeply hurting as a result of the internet's disruption of the industry. As community newspapers have downsized or closed, coverage of civic issues (information about education, jobs, housing, transportation, safety, and public health and health care) has suffered disproportionately to sports, arts, classifieds and weather news, especially for low-income Americans.

### Our Model

Civic Media is the next step in an evolution toward a new model that began with Chalkbeat. For nearly a decade, Chalkbeat's model of issue-specific, high-quality local journalism, focused on public education, has provided a blueprint for rapidly scaling local news by focusing on communities' most pressing questions, and mobilizing local philanthropic investment to make that possible. Our education reporting has grown to a newsroom of 60 serving eight states, supported by a \$12 million budget.

In 2020, a successful pilot confirmed that the leadership, technology, and business infrastructure supporting Chalkbeat could host a new vertical of coverage – Votebeat, focused on local voting policy and election administration. Votebeat launched permanent operations in four states in May 2022, with more to come.

With the formation of Civic Media, we will create a new umbrella nonprofit media company housing Chalkbeat, Votebeat, and future public interest news verticals. Civic Media's beats focus on policy – what government decides to do (or not do), and how its decisions affect people's lives. We envision covering five beats that include education, voting, health, climate/infrastructure, and economic security.

Our reporting is organized geographically in “bureaus” of journalists who live in the communities they serve, plus a national desk that ensures that local realities influence the

national conversation. We practice journalism in partnership with communities, starting by understanding people's information needs, then working with the community to find answers to open questions. We then share what we learn through news articles, events, and other forms of media that we distribute as widely as possible.

Like the most successful local media providers, our verticals cover a single topic across multiple regions, serving a clear community of interest, and bundle those geographies in one shared product infrastructure. Services are shared across the network, allowing for scaled opportunities to attract talent and revenue that can provide the best shared services at the lowest cost. The model also offers widespread syndication across multiple general-interest and community-specific local and national outlets and platforms.

## Our Impact

- **In Colorado, a Chalkbeat investigation led to passage of a new law limiting seclusion and restraint:** Governor Jared Polis signed a law banning handcuffing students in most circumstances, requiring schools to notify parents promptly when they restrain students, and setting higher standards for school resource officers. Chalkbeat investigations highlighted gaps in the previous law, prompted advocacy groups to elevate this issue on their legislative agendas, and helped show advocates and lawmakers why the status quo wasn't working.
- **In New York City, our coverage led the education department to reverse plans to cut funding for restorative justice programs:** Officials were planning to cut funding for restorative justice programs, but reversed course. A central DOE staffer said that Chalkbeat's coverage of those planned cuts played a role in influencing the city to keep funding for restorative justice programs steady.
- **In Chicago, we exposed a system that pushed Black and Latino students toward military service, prompting an investigation:** The Chicago Board of Education opened an investigation into the practice of automatic enrollment into JROTC courses at predominantly Black and Latino high schools, and the district promised to make changes, after Chalkbeat established a clear pattern of automatic enrollment in military courses at schools on the city's South and West Sides that serve a mostly low-income student body.
- **In Indiana, lawmakers changed a law after we reported on how a virtual school was using state funding:** Our reporting exposed a new virtual school that was incentivizing enrollment by offering parents \$1,700 to spend on educational materials that could include Netflix subscriptions, Christmas gifts, and toys. Chalkbeat's scrutiny of this program led lawmakers to tighten the law in order to prevent this potential misuse of public funds.

- **In Virginia, our Votebeat newsletter on Unintended downsides possible under bans on private election funding** prompted internal discussions in the Virginia state government over how to respond to a new law. A Virginia state elections official shared that he and the state commissioner were circulating our article to the office of the state attorney general and other decision makers to inform the discussion as they work to interpret a new Virginia law banning private resources for elections.
- **In Potter County, Texas, we spotlighted Republicans' plans – ultimately reversed under public pressure – to run their own primary election separate from the county**, introducing an increased risk of voter confusion and fraud.
- **In Michigan, our reporters produced a fact-checked debunking of fraud myths that election administrators used to educate voters and correct misunderstandings about voting machines.** Our reporters also wrote articles in the election's aftermath that sounded the alarm on the coming anti-election hostilities. One such exclusive piece presaged the hostilities surrounding officials' efforts to uphold the election results. Another, published right after the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, traced the roots of that violence to the threats local officials had been facing for months.

*Sign up to receive Chalkbeat ([chalkbeat.org](http://chalkbeat.org)) and Votebeat ([votebeat.org](http://votebeat.org)) newsletters for free access to all of our local news.*