

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

IS VITAL TO A HEALTHY COMMUNITY.

**FORMER CONESTOGA VIEW NURSING
HOME 'ALARMINGLY' UNDERSTAFFED
DURING STATE INSPECTION**

**LANCASTER COUNTY'S
2005 SALE OF
CONESTOGA VIEW
MANDATED QUARTERLY
REPORTS, MEETINGS —
BUT FEW HAPPENED**

**PLAIN COMMUNITY IN
LANCASTER COUNTY
LARGELY ESCHEWING
COVID-19 VACCINE**

**WHO'S BEHIND
LANCASTER PATRIOT?
AN ALT-RIGHT
PODCASTER FROM TEXAS,
INVESTIGATION SHOWS**

***“Local journalism is
under assault.”***

— STEPHEN MEDVIC

WITF reporter Brett Sholtis spent the last year and a half shining a light on people with mental health issues and how their encounters with police and the judicial system often result in incarceration rather than necessary treatment.

That reporting included the story of a young woman with severe mental illness whose condition deteriorated as she sat in a Bucks County jail. As a result of the story, she was transferred to a state hospital.

That is just one example of how high-impact local journalism can help a community assess its problems and look at ways to solve them, says Scott Blanchard, senior editor of WITF news and StateImpact Pennsylvania, a collaborative reporting effort covering the state's energy economy.

"I think we know, and there have been studies that show us, how important it is to have strong, independent local journalism in communities," he says. "When that is present, civic participation increases, accountability of public officials and elected officials increases, and those are the kinds of things that are part of healthy communities."

Unfortunately, a growing number of communities across the United States are losing their source of independent local journalism. With the closing of some 1,800 newspapers since 2004, some two-thirds of American counties lack a local newspaper and many others have ghost newspapers that lack routine reporting on news such as local government meetings, leaving residents in the dark about proposed tax hikes or important policy issues.

The Lancaster County Local Journalism Fund, an initiative seeded with a \$500,000 contribution from the Steinman Foundation, is dedicated to ensuring Lancaster County does not suffer the same fate.

Begun last year in partnership with the Lancaster County Community Foundation, the fund has a mission of supporting, protecting and expanding independent local journalism by awarding grants to local organizations engaged in investigative and public interest journalism and media literacy.

The fund is administered by an independent board of managers composed of community leaders and journalists, says board member Susan Eckert, a former president of the United Way of Lancaster County.

The need to support local journalism is greater now than ever before, says board member Stephen Medvic, an F&M government professor who has taught a course on "Media and Politics" for the past quarter century.

"Local journalism is under assault," he says. "The kind of market pressures are such that we're really losing local journalism around the country, and it's a terrible loss."

"Lancaster is blessed to have LNP," says Bob Bee general manager of abc27. "There are counties all over the United States that don't have local journalists dedicated to serving that community, and that's just tragic."

Bee says numerous factors are challenging the health of local journalism, including the public's growing reliance on social media platforms, which often offer biased information without the rigorous fact-checking and regulations required of professional journalists, or the consequences for publishing falsehoods.

"It is important to help people recognize that there is something called fake news," Eckert says. "Outlets like social media have no journalistic standards to provide facts and accuracy. We really need to help people understand the difference between objective journalism and opinion."

A recent Pew Research study finds that Americans are far more trusting of their local news sources than of national news or social media. Add the fact that what happens in city, county and state government affects people's daily lives more than anything on the national level, Medvic says, and the health of local journalism becomes even more important.

"You have the big guys, the networks, the CNNs, but local journalism is what builds that local community," says Enelly Betancourt, a staff writer with LNP | LancasterOnline for 27 years and editor of LaVoz Lancaster, which focuses on the Hispanic community. "How else would people have conversations about affordable housing, or the rate of crime in the Lancaster County community or what's going on in our schools? A community that doesn't have that is a community that does not grow."

Sometimes that impact on our daily lives is very simple.

Through LaVoz, Betancourt has not only delivered the news, but also important information on basic topics such as housing and public health in a language most familiar to readers who are trying to adapt to a new life in a new country.

Sometimes, a simple call to a newspaper or TV station can have a big impact on just one life.

Kendra Nichols, an abc27 investigative reporter, recently reported on an area family whose above-ground pool collapsed, sending thousands of gallons of water into their basement. When their insurance company refused to cover the damage, they reached out to abc27 for help. After the station's investigation, the insurance company reversed its decision.

"Local journalists, on a day-to-day basis, help their local residents traverse the very complex waters of contracts and government, and that is a benefit," Bee says.

As much as the public benefits from local journalism, it can also play a role in enhancing it, Eckert says. The Local Journalism Fund board plans to create opportunities for people to share what they feel are important issues facing their communities. **The public can also donate to the Local Journalism Fund during this year's Extraordinary Give on Nov. 19 or by visiting lancfound.org/fund/localjournalism.**

Bee would add one more suggestion:

"Teach your children to read the paper, watch the news, learn about where they live every day," he says. "There's nothing more important for our democracy."

The fund is open to anyone involved in local journalism. To inquire about grant opportunities, email Lauren Frick at lfrick@steinmancommunications.com.



LancFound.org/fund/localjournalism