

California Local News Fellowship:

Final Evaluation Report

January 2026

Executive Summary

From 2023 to 2025 Impact Architects (IA) was the learning and evaluation partner for the California Local News Fellowship. The goal of the partnership was to understand the impact of the state's \$25 million investment for fellows, host newsrooms, and California communities. The work consisted of clarifying desired impact through key learning questions, data collection and analysis, and providing ongoing learning support for the Fellowship team. The work's key activities included:

- Developing a theory of change
- Surveying fellows and newsrooms at regular intervals
- Conducting case studies on different themes

These activities contributed to an impact report published in [late 2024](#). The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of progress toward the Fellowship's impact goals after two years of operation, when the first cohort of fellows has completed its two year stint, the second is one year in, and the third has been active since August, 2025.

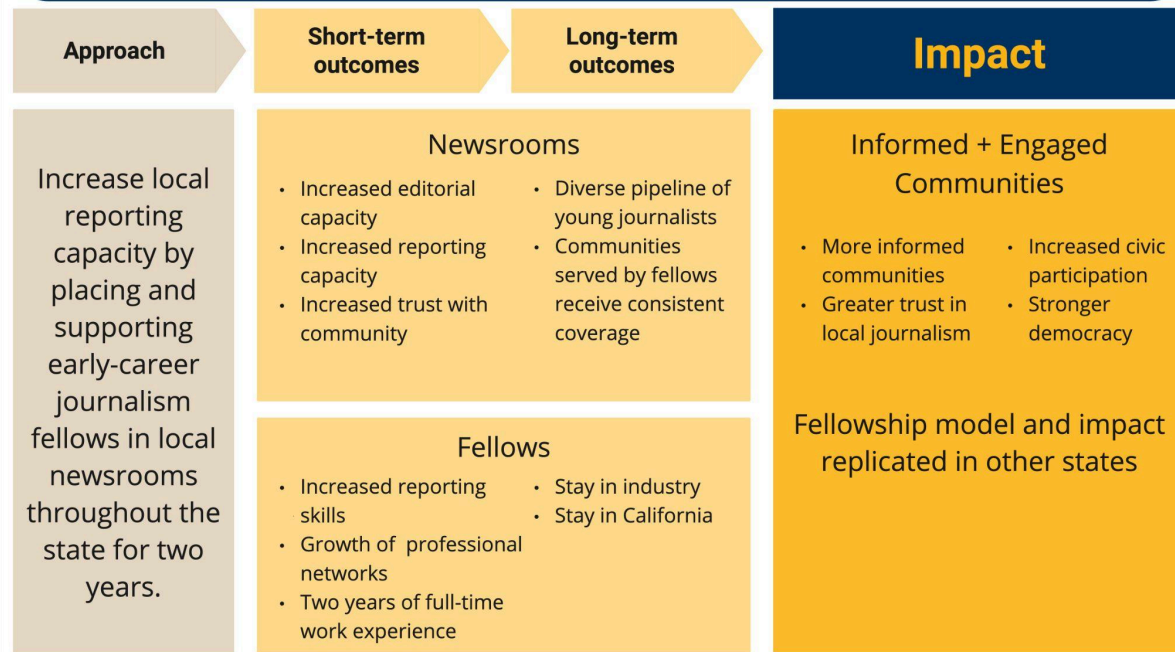
This report shows that the state of California's \$25 million investment has had an immediate positive impact on local news ecosystems throughout California. But in order for that impact to reach the journalism industry as a whole in California, or the state of democratic practices and democracy itself, it would need to be sustained far into the future.

Summary Learnings

In 2023, we developed a theory of change for the program designed to inform ongoing learning focused on short- and long-term outcomes for newsrooms and fellows, in addition to long-term impact for California communities, the ultimate site of success for the California Local News Fellowship. The outcomes and impact guided data collection and analysis over the course of the partnership. This report provides in depth analysis of each element of the theory of change, including current evidence of success, what would be needed to sustain that success, and what might be needed to achieve the goals for which it is currently too soon to determine success.

California Local News Fellowship: Theory of Change

Five-year, \$25 million commitment from the State of California to fund up to 120 reporting fellows to work for two years in local newsrooms throughout the state, with a focus on underserved communities.



The following table summarizes progress made thus far for the key impact measures outlined in the theory of change. "Evidence of success" represents how sure we are that the impact measure has been met since the launch of the program. Short-term outcomes that pertain to the Fellowship's most immediate outputs — hiring reporters and placing them in newsrooms — have the highest likelihood of having strong evidence, whereas long-term outcomes and ultimate impact has less strong evidence given the longer timeframe to effect change.

"Potential for sustainability" represents the likelihood that the current level of success will lead to lasting change, particularly without the continued involvement from the California Local News Fellowship. For instance, we can assume that increased reporting skills have set up reporters to continue developing those and new skills, assuming continued employment in the industry, and that they are better positioned to do so because they have a larger and stronger network of professional contacts. These outcomes are built into the program. On the other hand, the added reporting capacity a fellow provides to a newsroom might simply go away once the fellowship term ends, so the potential for sustainability is more limited. However, we also assume that the editorial capacity and a two-year window anticipating the end of the capacity will set up the newsroom to manage that loss and sustain output.

Contextual factors also play a role in the assessments, particularly as they relate to industry trends and the political environment.

California Local News Fellowship: Progress for key impact measures, January 2026				
Impact site	Outcome type	Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Fellows	Short-term	Increased reporting skills	Strong	High
		Growth of professional networks	Strong	High
		Two years full-time work experience	Strong	N/A
	Long-term	Stay in industry	Medium	Medium
		Stay in California	Medium	Medium
Newsrooms	Short-term	Increased editorial capacity	Strong	Medium
		Increased reporting capacity	Strong	Medium
		Increased trust with community	Strong	Medium
	Long-term	Diverse pipeline of young journalists	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
		Communities served by fellows receive consistent coverage	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Communities	Impact	More informed communities	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
		Greater trust in local journalism	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
		Increased civic participation	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
		Stronger democracy	Weak	Weak
		Fellowship replicated	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell

We know with a great deal of confidence that the direct and most immediate goals of the California Local News Fellowship are being met, particularly when it comes to the fellows.

Early career journalists that might not have had other opportunities in the industry or the chance for two years of uninterrupted, secure employment, gained professional experience, a network of professional contacts, and produced meaningful journalism for newsrooms that have trust and relationships but lacked reporting capacity.

Host newsrooms benefited from increased output of stories, as well as the ability to dedicate time to other aspects of the business that can contribute to growth, sustainability, and the ability to continue keeping California communities informed.

While there is anecdotal evidence of community impact, it is still too early to tell whether or not these immediate goals will have lasting change. We have sufficient evidence to say that, as a result of the fellowship, California communities within the service area of a fellow's newsroom were more informed. The evidence for this is that the newsrooms produced more content, and most newsrooms have seen audience growth. However, we cannot say that the result of communities being more informed during the fellowship has led to *more informed communities* in general. The same applies to trust and civic participation. We would need a great deal more data gathering on the ground over time to assess this measure.

We also know that because a vast majority of the fellows are continuing working as journalists in California, there is potential for the investment of time, relationship building, and community listening to lead to truly sustained coverage that results in trust, civic participation, and activities that contribute to a stronger democracy. It's too early to state that the program's long-term objectives have been met, but the building blocks that should lead to them are there.

The analysis below addresses each outcome in greater depth. The evidence used to support the conclusions come from IA's two-plus years of work with the California Local News Fellowship. They include surveys from fellows and newsrooms across all three cohorts, as well as published and unpublished case studies, which involved one-on-one interviews with fellows and newsroom leaders.

Analysis

Short-term outcomes

Fellows

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Increased reporting skills	Strong	High
Insight	The selection process is effectively identifying fellows committed to the field and who are likely to build lasting skills through on the job training, as well as through additional training and mentorship opportunities.	

Data from the inaugural 2023 cohort provides evidence that the fellowship is increasing fellows' reporting skills. We surveyed the fellows in fall 2024 and 2025, and in each survey we asked closed-ended questions that relate to this measure, as well as open-ended questions that didn't specifically ask about reporting skills, but that nevertheless referenced skills development as a valuable aspect of the experience.

At the one year mark, 32 out of 37 (86%) fellows rated the fellowship as "extremely valuable" or "very valuable" for their professional development. The high rate of positive feedback continued at the two-year mark, with 24 out of 26 (92%) respondents selecting one of those two options. In both surveys, over 80% of fellows consistently found a great deal of value for their professional development. The remaining respondents in both surveys found the experience to be at least "somewhat valuable." An even higher rate of fellows, about 90% across both surveys, either "strongly agree" or "agree" that the fellowship has helped them grow as journalists.

When asked what was most valuable at the one and two year marks, fellows tended to identify skills development and experience. As the California Local News Fellowship model suggests, experience is the most effective pathway to increasing reporting skills. A selection of voices from fellows illustrate how on-the-job learning contributed to a valuable experience, and how that valuable experience could theoretically make its way to California communities:

- The fellowship has allowed me to dive right into reporting after graduating college. Over the past year, I have done many radio stories. When I began [the fellowship], I thought I would mostly be writing for our website. I now want to continue broadcasting and radio.
- I've had the opportunity to grow my portfolio in a small newsroom, allowing me to focus on local issues that affect marginalized communities. The larger fellowship has also provided invaluable mentorship.

- [The fellowship] has absolutely improved my writing and general skills. I feel faster and more comfortable as a reporter and writer. It is incredibly fulfilling to work for a hyperlocal paper and be ingrained within the community.
- The most valuable component of the fellowship has been giving me the ability to focus solely on journalism and hone my craft, instead of needing to always draw my attention elsewhere just to get by. In addition, it has provided me with the confidence that I can be a successful full-time reporter.
- I have learned skills directly through fellowship trainings, and full-time employment has allowed me to take on longer and more ambitious projects.
- The hands-on work in the newsrooms was the most valuable aspect. Day-to-day work, building a beat, getting clips, talking with my peer reporters and editors, and other hands-on experiences have given me a lot of insight into reporting work.

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Growth of professional networks	Strong	High
Insight	Nearly all fellows indicate that their networks have grown and are stronger. While much of this is a result of being introduced to new colleagues both internal and external to their organization, another part of it was facilitated by the California Local News Fellowship's trainings and the space it provided for mutual support.	

Growth in fellows' professional networks is a key goal because of the various positive outcomes it contributes to. A strong network helps professional growth through peer learning and mentorship, it builds connections that can lead to future employment opportunities, and it provides pathways for advancement. At the one and two year marks, we asked fellows how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "my professional network of contacts has grown." In 2024, more than half of the respondents selected "strongly agree," while nearly 40% selected "agree." In 2025, all responding fellows selected either "strongly agree" or "agree," with two-thirds of them selecting "strongly agree."

While this objective might seem like it should be achieved as a matter of course by introducing reporters to new colleagues and one another, there are challenges to network building. For instance, while some fellows worked at large newsrooms such as KPBS, others worked at small places with one or two other employees. Secondly, many of the fellows are working full-time for the first time in their professional lives, and they are learning and honing basic skills on a daily basis. Time constraints limit networking opportunities as well. Finally, many fellows were placed in rural counties in California, meaning that they were unable to benefit from nearby industry colleagues. For example, Francisco Manuel Martínezcuello is placed at the Trinity Journal, which is the only local news source in a county that is 3,200 square miles in size but only has a population of 15,400.

California Local News Fellows provide coverage in **17** counties whose populations are at least 10% rural.



The counting of fellows includes coverage area, regardless of where the newsroom is physically located.
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

The California Local News Fellowship is able to provide networking support, despite these challenges, by providing collective training for the fellows and creating space for fellows to connect and support one another independent of the fellowship. In a case study about coverage of the Los Angeles fires of January, 2024, fellows said that the fellow network was valuable for emotional support. Victoria Ivie said that she would frequently check-in on fellows on Slack to see how they were doing while covering the wildfires. She also found it to be a place for commiseration. Samantha Norris said that "a lot of what helped was the emotional and mental support from fellows during that time." She continued: "They were helpful in listening and talking through stuff I was feeling. Having that network does help, especially one that does the same kind of work and understands what it is we're all going through." This form of support is meant to provide the foundation of sturdy relationships and future support among colleagues.

Some responses from open-ended questions regarding growth and strengthening networks include:

- My professional journalist network has grown A LOT. I spend each day with reporters of varying experience levels and have become a part of the Fresno area's journalism community.
- The network of journalists/fellows with whom you are immediately connected on the day it begins. Working alongside and seeing the work other fellows did across the state provides a comprehensive view of what is happening. Also, the hands-on expert training that the fellowship provided was extremely helpful.
- The fellowship has helped me grow logistically as a journalist, but also allowed me to grow my network of professional contacts. This happened through connecting with those in and around my newsroom, my cohort, and in the mentoring program. I walked into the fellowship with a good

background of skills and clips, but less experience of what it truly meant to be a full-time working journalist. Through the fellowship, I was able to gain this experience in a supportive environment.

- I came into this fellowship with no experience in a full time professional newsroom, and I'm leaving with many more network contacts and two years of experience.
- The trainings, the connections made with other professionals, the connections made with other platforms across the state, the mentorship.

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Two years of full-time work experience	Strong	High
Insight	Two years of full-time work experience is both a highly successful element of the fellowship and is foundational to success in other areas. Other programs modeled after the California Local News Fellowship should make every effort to provide two full years of support.	

The decision to make the fellowship appointments two years has been fundamental to many other measures of success. The two years of runway allows the fellows to settle into their jobs without worrying about searching for new opportunities too soon. It also gives newsroom leaders time to dedicate to matters other than reporting for an extended period, as well as to plan for retention and/or maintaining the fellow's role in the newsroom. In IA's baseline survey of fellows in fall 2023, "having financial stability while gaining experience in journalism" was the most frequently cited primary motivation for applying to the program, as it was selected by 46% of fellows. The surveys in the subsequent two years indicate that between 80 and 90% of fellows agreed that the fellowship contributed to their short-term financial stability. In the 2025 survey, we also asked about the fellowship's contribution to their long-term financial stability, and nearly two-thirds agreed that it had contributed. We can infer that skills, marketability, and actual full-time employment are primary factors.

Additionally, the Fellowship has a high completion rate for fellows. Among the 76 fellows appointed in the first two cohorts, only four left the fellowship early, and at least two of those did so for full-time employment opportunities. Early career journalists are taking advantage of the runway provided, and the value of two years as opposed to another timeframe is evident in open-ended responses:

- I think the fellowship allows a journalist to spend two years doing local news WITHOUT living in existential fear about being laid off/not making any money. That in itself is huge given the sorry state of the journalism industry in general.
- Being paid a living wage and guaranteed two years of employment.
- The fellowship has been a huge learning experience. The most valuable component has been getting to work continuously with the same colleagues and editors for two years as an early career journalist. So many starter positions for young professionals last for just one year or less. The

California Local News Fellowship's two year-term has given me more time to develop professional skills and relationships at a lasting and sustainable pace.

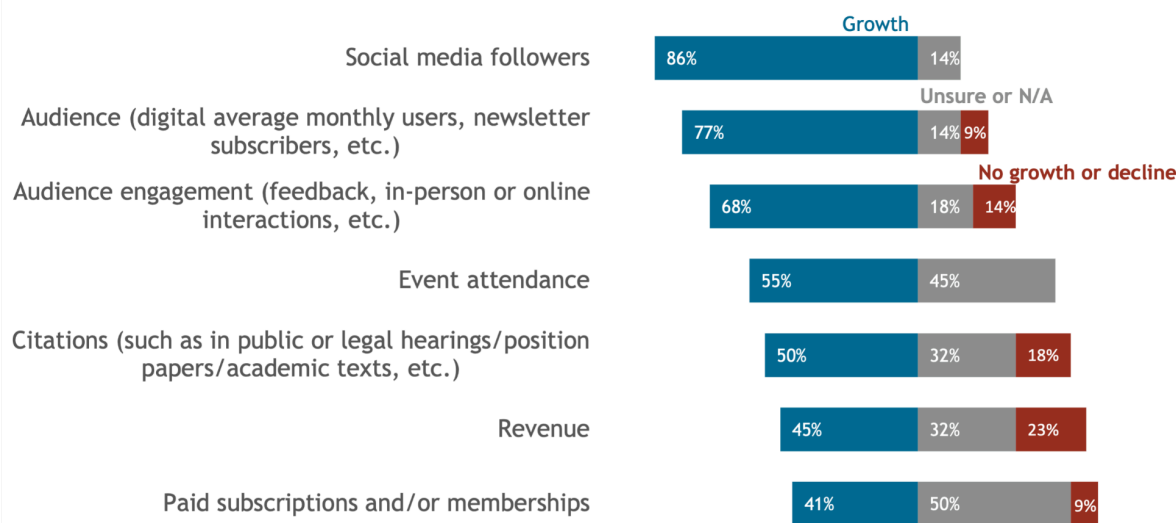
- The most valuable component of the fellowship is being able to have work and live as a journalist with the support of an institution like Berkeley. My host newsroom is great and I love the beat I'm working on. It's nice to know I have this role guaranteed for two years total with the backing/support of the UC.
- The security of having a salaried position in a small newsroom for 2 years, especially in a community that needs local reporting.

Newsrooms

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Increased editorial capacity	Strong	Medium
Insight	Fellowship appointments are correlated with audience growth. The typical role of fellows to produce content for underserved communities coupled with the editorial capacity the fellows offer suggests at least some causal effect as well. Revenue growth is not as common because it takes longer to realize. However, revenue also saw the most decline, suggesting that the value fellows bring is not itself a solution to the monetary issues facing local news.	

Increasing editorial capacity refers to an organization's ability to translate the contributions of the fellowship into organizational growth. In the year two survey of newsrooms that hosted a 2023 fellow, we asked whether they experienced growth in a variety of areas pertaining to audience and revenue. Most newsrooms saw audience growth, and over 40% of the 22 responding newsrooms saw growth in revenue or revenue-generating activities, such as subscriptions and event attendance.

Nearly all newsrooms saw audience growth, but fewer saw revenue growth.



Audience growth cannot be entirely attributed to having a fellow, but newsrooms themselves acknowledge the ways in which the fellows contributed to such growth. Fellows have had the biggest impact in social media presence and audience engagement, both digitally and in-person.

We asked an open-ended question inviting newsrooms to specify, if they are able, the growth they experienced.

Revenue

- Our revenue grew plus ~ \$600 monthly
- Since the start of the fellowship we are now part of the LA Local, an initiative in part funded by The American Journalism Project and so this has led to more resources and more growth.
- We definitely sell more papers at newsstands on days when there are fellowship articles published.
- We received a couple of grants during the course of this year.

Paid subscriptions/memberships

- Overall steady increase of NSPR donors

Audience (digital average monthly users, newsletter subscribers, etc.)

- The launch of our Newsbytes Newsletter saw subscriptions and open clicks showed a steady increase to upwards of 50% in some instances
- Stories used to get 50 clicks on average, now often ~1,000
- 80% growth
- 500+ newsletter subscribers

Social media followers

- We have experienced quite a bit of growth (1,500 followers on Instagram in Jan 2024 expanded to 5,574 as of Nov 2025). Currently averaging 180,000 profile visits per month.

However, during our fellow's tenure, Jan 2024, we added a digital media specialist to KVCR's staff. So, it is hard to credit ONLY the reporting for this growth.

- Our YouTube subscriber count grew from 27K to 37K
- Hundreds more followers on Facebook and Instagram, also seeing growth on Nextdoor. Instagram grew 45% in the last year, Google clicks up 20% in the last year.
- Facebook and Tik Tok followers showed rapid growth - moving the needle on our FB followers from a stubborn 6800 to 8500 and our Tik Tok following to over 1K in the space of 4 four months. Instagram and X had steady increases over time, as did our website engagement (up from 91K to 141K monthly in a four month period in Q3 2025, in part due to our new tech stack, but, significantly, also due to her contributions to our local coverage)
- About 4,500 new Facebook followers
- 60% growth
- 4,000+ social followers
- 20,000 followers on Instagram

Event attendance

- We're doing more events around issues, so we've seen more participation as a result.
- We have also increased the number of events during his tenure. So, again hard to calculate specific impact from having the fellow on staff.
- 2025 was our biggest year for events and Callie took part in several
- Had our first events

Audience engagement (feedback, in-person or online interactions, etc.)

- We have had multiple testimonials and general feedback regarding the positive impact of our fellow's extensive local reportage - both online and via email from local community members. For example, one person commented on her article entitled, Council Fights for Targeted Budget Restorations, Passed to Mayor's Desk for Approval: "It's one of the best stories I've seen on the budget."
- We gained presence in events and community engagements
- Interactions used to be infrequent, now they're common. Hundreds of comments on Instagram and Facebook posts. Facebook engagement up 32% in the last year.
- Engagement has increased tremendously. Many people comment on Andrew's stories on social media and directly message him too. They also spot him in person at events and reply to the newsletter he writes.
- Engagement has grown. Not sure how to quantify
- Dozens more letters each month from the younger generation.

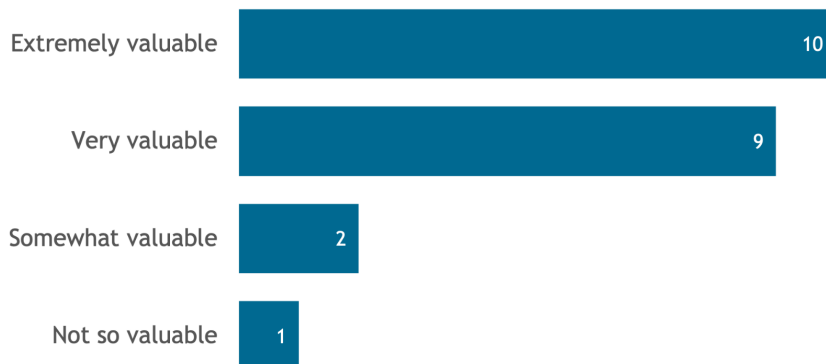
Citations (such as in public or legal hearings/position papers/academic texts, etc.)

- Papers and academic texts mentioned our efforts
- Our newsroom has been cited multiple times in news media, high school and college classrooms, and in government databases.
- Citations include [City of San Diego](#), [CPI San Diego](#), [Library Foundation](#), [CET Fund](#), [Scott Peters](#), and more.

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Increased reporting capacity	Strong	Medium
Insight	Reporting capacity expanded to either reach communities the newsroom was not reaching or to strengthen existing relationships. Immigration became a central theme over the two years, but because demographic communities were an initial focus, the fellows and newsrooms were well positioned to meet the heightened need. Retention of fellows is mixed, leading to questions about the sustainability of this capacity.	

The nature of the fellowship means that reporting output increased for all newsrooms, but increasing reporting capacity means that fellows developed new beats, strengthened existing ones, reached new communities, and helped the organization fulfill its mission. Overall, newsrooms found a great deal of value in the fellowship in these areas.

How valuable was the fellow for helping your newsroom fulfill its mission?



When asked what local issues received sustained coverage because of the fellowship that might otherwise have been missed, newsrooms highlighted a variety of topics. Six of the 22 newsroom respondents mentioned coverage of immigration or refugee communities. Specific topics included immigration and the workforce, agriculture, immigration surveillance, and refugee resettlement. Fellows allowed newsrooms to cover a topic that has a significant impact on California communities. Additionally, they were set up to do so from the start, so when the nature of immigration coverage changed and gained greater significance in 2025, these newsrooms didn't have to start from scratch.

For example, in the 2023 baseline survey, 17 newsrooms identified specific demographic populations they wanted to reach. Some were specifically identified as immigrant communities, such as "non-Spanish speaking Mexican and Central American immigrants," "recent immigrants

from India," and "immigrant and uprooted" people. Others are not specifically identified as immigrant communities, but who can reasonably be included as populations that might be invested in such coverage because immigration policies and actions affect them. These include "younger Latinx audience," "Spanish speakers," and "Chinese Americans."

Immigration coverage is one important example. Other examples are evident in case studies. For example, additional reporting capacity has allowed rural areas to see significant increases in news coverage, more thorough coverage of the Los Angeles wildfires from new perspectives, and a decentering of northern San Diego County to include coverage of the less frequently served south and the adjacent Imperial County.

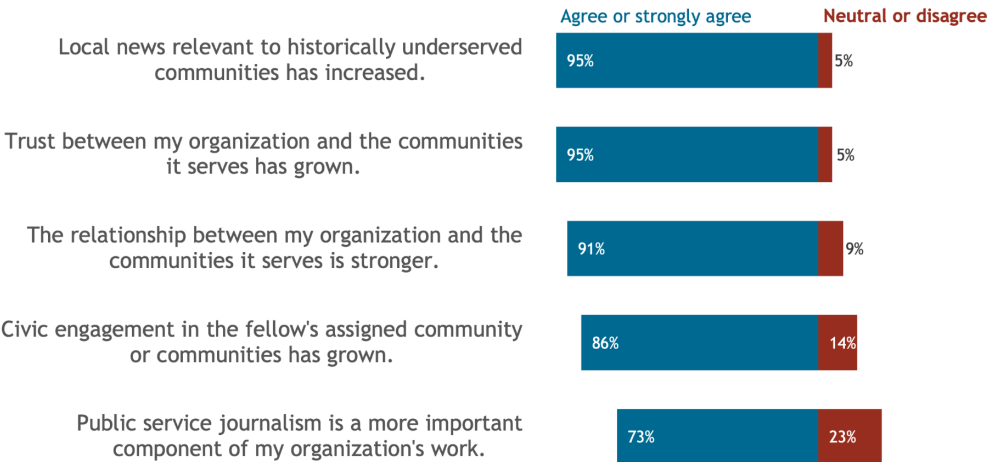
Like editorial capacity, the sustainability of increased reporting capacity and coverage will depend on whether or not the position can continue. The outlook is mixed. Eleven out of 26 (42%) responding fellows say they are remaining with their organization in some capacity, one said that they have a job at a different local news organization, and two have found employment outside of journalism. From the newsroom side, nine of 22 (41%) say that the fellow's role will be vacant as they seek outside resources to try and maintain the role. Eight newsrooms said that they wanted to retain their fellow but were unable to, with a lack of funding and/or budget being the primary reason.

These results can be seen as a baseline for future cohorts, and future assessments can prepare for deeper analysis by asking additional preliminary questions: ***Is the California Local News Fellowship satisfied with this rate of retention? How much can the Fellowship team do considering the primary barrier appears to be funding?***

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Increased trust with communities	Strong	Medium
Insight	Newsrooms perceive more trust and stronger relationships among communities as a result of the fellowship. Given that the task of most fellows was to create new relationships with underserved communities or strengthen those from existing ones, the evidence is strong.	

We asked newsrooms to estimate the impact their fellows had on relationships with communities, including trust and civic engagement. Newsrooms perceive an increase in trust and strength of relationships. As noted above, that might be because the relationships did not exist, as would be the case for a fellow whose job was to cover a geography underserved by the newsroom or a population underserved by local news in general.

Newsrooms overwhelmingly agree that the fellow had a positive impact on relationships with communities.



In addition to newsrooms' perceptions, the 17 fellows we spoke with that contributed to building our case studies conducted over the past two years provide ample evidence of what fellows have done to build trust. Being present even when there's not a story in the works and simply introducing oneself to community members was a major theme in all of the case studies. For instance, Danielle Bergstrom, founder of Fresnoland, said that their fellow, Pablo Orihuela, was only able to produce high impact journalism about a local mobile home park because he invested the time and energy to introduce himself to all residents outside of the context of writing a story. Kori Suzuki, a fellow at KPBS who has since been hired full-time, said that building trust for his beats (the South Bay and the Imperial Valley), were growth areas for him during the fellowship and were crucial because KPBS didn't typically have a presence in those areas. We know that the trust building practices are there, but it is not entirely clear that they have translated to greater trust overall.

Long-term outcomes

Fellows

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Stay in industry	Medium	Medium
Stay in California	Medium	Medium
Insight	The majority of fellows state that the fellowship both made it more likely for them to remain in the industry and continue working in California. Whether that remains true over the next	

	several years, especially in a challenging job market for journalists, will be the true measure of success. For now, we have evidence that the Fellowship has contributed to journalistic capacity in the state and has filled an opportunity gap for early career journalists. It remains to be seen if there are sufficient opportunities post-fellowship.
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We asked the inaugural cohort fellows whether the fellowship is contributing to their decision to remain a journalist and continue working in California. In 2024, 30 out of 37 (81%) respondents selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" regarding remaining a journalist. The results remained strong on the 2025 survey, where 19 out of 26 (73%) either selected "strongly agree" or "agree." Consistently high results persisted when asked about continuing to work in California. In the 2024 survey, 24 (66%) selected either "agree" or "strongly agree," and in the 2025 survey, 19 out of 26 (73%) did so.

As the first cohort fellows completed their appointment, there's a strong indication that they are likely to remain in the industry and continue working in California. We recommend that the Fellowship team maintain contact with alumni to check-in on progress at later dates.

Newsrooms

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Diverse pipeline of young journalists	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Insight	Demographic surveys indicate that California Local News Fellows come from a variety of backgrounds. The Fellowship has contributed to a pipeline, but whether the pipeline sticks and shapes the future of local news in California remains to be seen.	

The Fellowship is intentional about selecting journalists that have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Demographic surveys of the 2023 and 2024 fellows illustrate this diversity. Respondents were able to select a large number of identities, as well as self-identify. As a result, the responses represent a wider range of identities than the basic census categories. We can say, however, that the percentage of fellows who identified as white (either alone or in addition to another identity) is lower than for the state of California. According to 2024 estimates, 34% of the California population identifies only as white, and 69% identifies as white in addition to another identity. Across two surveys, about 20% of respondents identified as white either alone or in addition to another selection.

Coupled with the existing success and the yet-to-be-determined nature of other measures of success, we can conclude that the California Local News Fellowship is contributing to a diverse pipeline of young journalists, but it remains to be seen how involved in the industry they will be going forward.

Outcome	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Communities served by fellows receive consistent coverage	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Insight	Newsrooms that have and have not retained their fellows can still achieve this goal, but as of now it is too soon to tell whether or not the coverage will remain at or near the same level as it was with a fellow.	

This outcome is about organizational growth through the work done by the fellow. It considers whether the relationships built or strengthened by the fellow become ingrained within the organization, such that the service area or topical focus of the organization is permanently expanded. It is too soon to tell whether or not this has happened, even for organizations that have retained their fellows to serve in the same role. Similarly, newsrooms that have not retained their fellow could still achieve this goal, whether through a new hire or by implementing new approaches as a result of the expanded editorial and reporting capacity afforded by the fellowship.

For future learning, we recommend that the California Local News Fellowship check back every one to two years to understand how sustained the coverage has been, and if, why, and how it has changed. The Fellowship does not necessarily need to keep specific track of the "communities served," but it could simply ask which new and existing communities were served with more reporting and whether or not that type of coverage has been maintained.

Impact

Impact	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
More informed communities	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Greater trust in local journalism	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Increased civic participation	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell
Insight	More time would be needed for any of these impact areas to be realized, and determining success would require perspectives from community members.	

Newsrooms and fellows reported ample information to demonstrate that the fellows' work resulted in *more information for more community members*, but additional time would be needed to understand whether that led to communities *being more informed* in a sustained way. Regarding the second two areas of impact, previously cited survey results suggest that newsrooms perceive increases in trust and civic participation among community members. While that is valuable information and is drawn from what they saw their fellows do and how they perceived shifts in community engagement overall, they remain perceptions.

Fully answering all of these questions would need the perspectives of community members, which could be gained through community listening sessions and/or professional public polling. Gathering this information after three and five years of programming would give enough time for change to take place. The challenge would be relating perspectives directly to the Fellowship, especially in areas where there are multiple news organizations.

We asked newsrooms to elaborate on specific ways the fellows shaped the organization and its relationship to communities with the hope of getting specific information about civic engagement, trust, and community connection. The responses focused on what fellows did rather than what their actions resulted in. For instance, one response reads: "She reached out to numerous environmental organizations and grassroots groups in Oakland and wrote dozens of stories, helping reflect these community concerns and voices in our paper. We could not have done this without her." This demonstrates how the work highlighted community concerns, and how doing so provided value to the newsroom. But we don't know how community members felt.

Impact	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Stronger democracy	Weak	Weak
Insight	Democracy in the U.S. is not stronger since the program's launch, and the target impact might need to be revised to be more achievable.	

The nonprofit, nonpartisan anti-authoritarian organization Protect Democracy has developed an [Authoritarian Threat Index](#). The index ranges from one (low threat) to five (catastrophic threat). The areas of democratic practice that result in an overall score include treatment of media, executive constraints, elections, civil liberties, civil violence, and rhetoric. In the United States, the scores range from 3.2 to 3.9, indicating an overall severe threat to American democracy. This is defined as "violations that signal significant erosion of democracy quality and warn of high potential for breakdown in future." American democracy is under a greater threat today than when the Fellowship launched in 2023.

There's no data to suggest that the program has had any effects on democracy, but we shouldn't have expected it to. It's unrealistic to expect a single fellowship program to meaningfully

strengthen democracy, even at the local level. A free and active press is an essential pillar of democracy, but it can't stand alone, and the work to meaningfully and measurably strengthen democracy requires a much broader effort from civil society and elected officials.

We recommend that future assessments of the California Local News Fellowship focus more on *democratic practices*, some of which can be tied to other intended outcomes around civic engagement. How fellows and their host newsrooms bolster free and fair elections, voting, volunteerism, and mutual aid might be some examples. Longevity and complexity mean that the California Local News Fellowship might only be able to identify contributions to strengthening democratic practices, but the added specificity will still paint a more accurate picture of what the Fellowship can do.

Impact	Evidence of success	Potential for sustainability
Fellowship replicated	Too soon to tell	Too soon to tell

Two similar state-level programs exist, one in [Washington state](#) and one in [New Mexico](#). Washington's Murrow News Fellowship launched at roughly the same time the California Local News Fellowship did in 2023. The New Mexico Local News Fellowships & Internships program launched earlier, with its pilot program in 2019.

The California Local News Fellowship required \$25 million in state funding for a five year runway. It requires the grassroots legislative work and the buy-in of state politicians. It's a challenging task to accomplish, even in a state favorable to the news industry. As of now, there's little evidence the model is being replicated at the state-level.

Summary

Over the first two years of the California Local News Fellowship, the program has effectively met its immediate goals by providing more than 30 early-career journalists with two years of stable, full-time employment, which significantly increased their reporting skills and expanded their professional networks. There are currently more than 60 active fellows who have not yet reached the two-year mark of their experience.

Newsrooms reported on and provided examples of increased editorial and reporting capacity, often in the service of building trust and relationships with previously underserved communities. They also report organizational growth, particularly in digital audience and social media presence. While these gains cannot all be attributed to having a fellow, their community outreach and reporting output certainly contributed.

While there is strong evidence of immediate success for fellows and newsrooms — such as high completion rates and relationship building with communities — it is still too soon to definitively measure long-term impacts on meeting community information needs, increasing civic engagement, developing sustainable trust, and strengthening democratic practices. In particular, more information would need to be gathered from community members in California to understand how perceptions and practices might have changed in the communities where fellows have had a presence.