WSAC COUNTY LEADERS CONFERENCE · NOVEMBER 2026

What Counties Need to Know About the Local News Crisis

...and what's being done about it



Sarah Gustavus Lim
Co-founder, Washington State News Alliance



Kaarin Austin
Executive Director, Washington News Fund



Jody Brannon
Report for Washington, WSU Murrow College

What you'll take away today

01

How the decline of local news affects your county's ability to **inform and engage residents**

02

How **philanthropy and public policy** are working together in other states, and what might apply in Washington

03

How **Report for Washington,** a national pilot, aims to place reporters in all 39 counties, covering public policy and local municipalities

---

Why it matters
All panelists

The national picture
Sarah

What other states and communities are doing
Kaarin

Report for Washington
Jody

Your questions
Everyone

Why local news matters to county government

67%

of Washington newsroom jobs were lost between 2005 and 2020

~12

of Washington's 39 counties are served by a single weekly newspaper

70% → 55%

drop in local news readers who could name their mayor, in just two years

Civic life ↓

Engagement falls and partisanship rises when local coverage is replaced by national content

For counties, fewer reporters means emptier hearings and more rumor to correct.

Sources: Washington Legislature findings (2023 c 286); League of Women Voters of Washington, "The Decline of Local News and Its Impact on Democracy" (2022); Hayes & Lawless, "News Hole" (2021); Lee Shaker, Portland State University.

Washington News Fund

PART 1 · WHY IT MATTERS

The Proximity Paradox

Local news is the hardest to find

44%

say news about their own neighborhood is hard to find

40%

say information about their county or city is hard to find

75%+

say national news is easy to find

Local political information is the topic residents rate as most important, and it shows the widest gap between how much it matters and how satisfied people are with what they get.

Source: Washington News Fund statewide survey, Embold Research for Impact Architects, Aug. 2026, about 3,300 respondents, English and Spanish. Preliminary results.

Washington News Fund



The national picture

Sarah Gustavus Lim

Co-founder, Washington State News Alliance

WSNA

WASHINGTON STATE NEWS ALLIANCE

There are fewer newsrooms & journalists

- This year's **State of Local News Report** (published by the Local News Initiative at Northwestern) found that the number of counties considered "newsroom deserts" has steadily increased year over year and 238 counties now lack a reliable source of local news
  - Some disagree with "newsroom desert" classification, but it represents the loss across the country of local newspapers

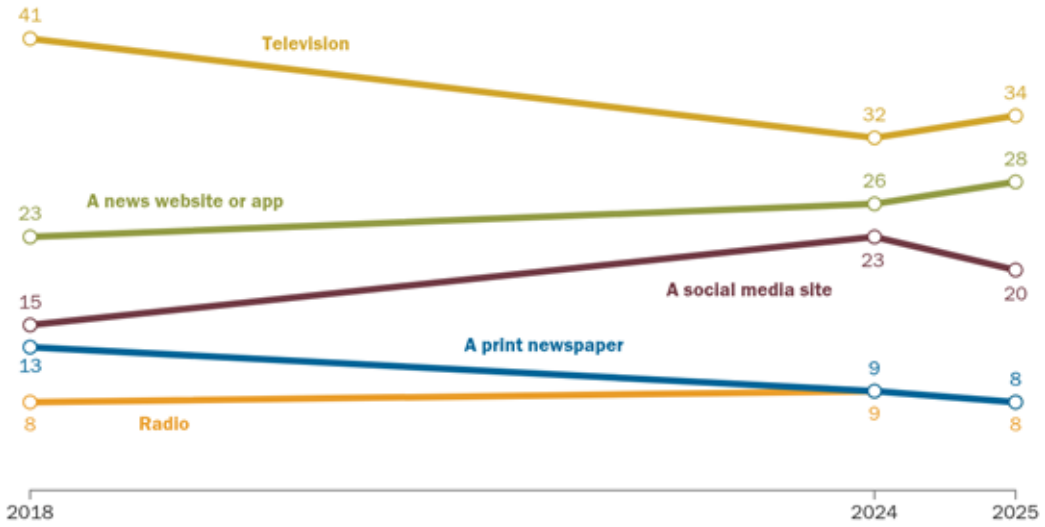
- The number of journalists across the country has also declined for many years. Layoffs and closures of local news outlets has has a particularly significant impact on small communities and rural areas of the country.



Audience trends

Local platform preferences

% of U.S. adults who say they prefer ___ for getting local news and information

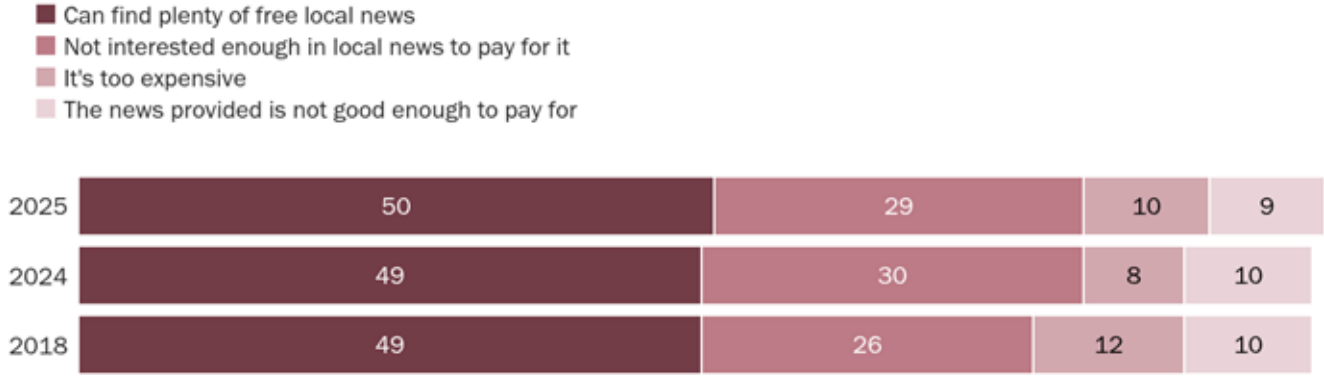


Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 8-14, 2025.

PEW-KNIGHT INITIATIVE

Why U.S. adults don't pay for local news

Among U.S. adults who have not paid or given money to any local news source in the past year, % who say the main reason they didn't pay is ...



Note: Respondents who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 18-24, 2025.

PEW-KNIGHT INITIATIVE



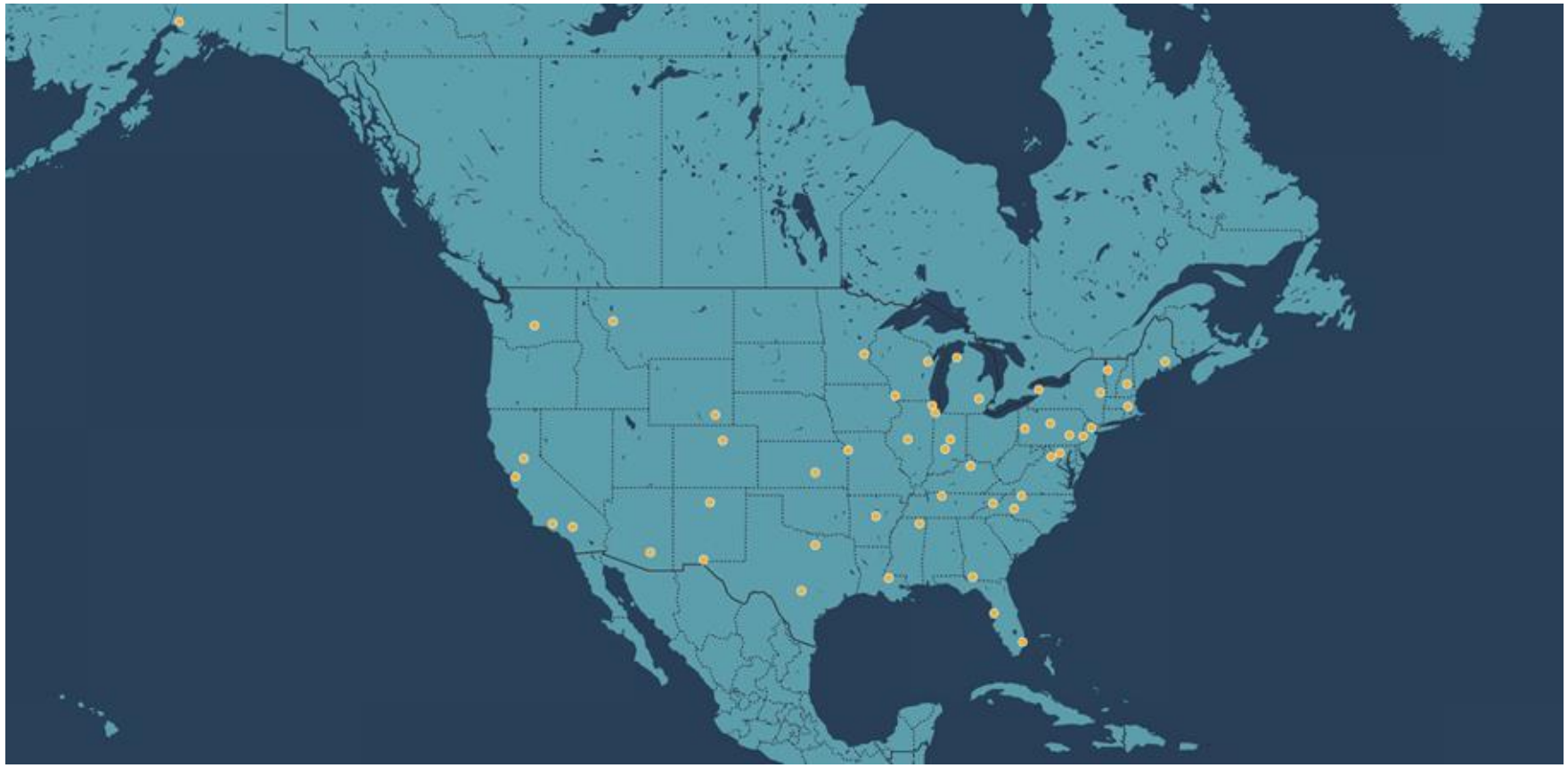
Sarah Gustavus Lim · Co-founder, Washington State News Alliance

Washington State
News Alliance

Who else is serving news and information needs?

- **Digital startups -** these can be for-profit or nonprofit, publishing on websites and newsletters or video platforms like YouTube
  - Digital startups can serve hyperlocal, regional or national audience and/or communities like immigrants who speak a shared language or diaspora communities
- **Independent creators** – often on social media or managing peer groups on platforms like WhatsApp
- **Trusted messengers** - these can include faith leaders, nonprofits or civic groups that answer questions and share information from trustworthy sources
  - some of these groups also partner with local government to share information, for example translating health messages during the COVID-19 pandemic

Press Forward: philanthropy organizing at scale





Sarah Gustavus Lim · Co-founder, Washington State News Alliance

Washington State
News Alliance

WASHINGTON NEWS FUND

Washington's Press Forward chapter

Community foundations pooling support for local news

- Whatcom Community Foundation
- Yakima Valley Community Foundation
- Blue Mountain Community Foundation
- Community Foundation of South Puget Sound
- Greater Tacoma Community Foundation
- Innovia Foundation
- Community Foundation of Snohomish County

$39K

to WSU's Report for Washington, $1,000 for each of the 39 counties

$75K

to the Washington State News Alliance for statewide field building

2:1

match on community gifts to local newsrooms throughout April 2027

3,292

Washingtonians surveyed on the news they need, with listening sessions this fall

Your community foundation may already be part of this work.

Washington News Fund

Washington’s own collaborative effort

The **Washington State News Alliance** formed last year to bring together journalists, newsroom leaders, trusted messengers and other civic leaders to talk about what’s happening across the state and the responses that are needed to improve access to local news in our communities.

- WSNA started a monthly newsletter called Fresh Ground
- We led a convening in Yakima in May 2026
- We’ve engaged a broad range of potential stakeholders to identify where there are opportunities for collaboration in the future



Sarah Gustavus Lim · Co-founder, Washington State News Alliance

Washington State
News Alliance

PART 3 · 10 MIN

The Policy Landscape (here & elsewhere)

Kaarin Austin

Executive Director, Washington News Fund

Washington News Fund

State tax credits for local news jobs

New York

Passed 2024

$90M over three years

Refundable payroll credits to keep and add newsroom jobs, up to $320K per outlet a year

Illinois

Passed 2024

$25M over five years

First checks went out in 2025, $4M to 40 news organizations running 120 outlets

New Mexico

Passed 2026

Up to $15K per journalist

Also the first state credit for printing newspapers

California

Passed 2026

$20K per journalist

Signed Sept. 30. Starts in 2027 with no cap on the pool, and covers nonprofits and public broadcasters

In every case the money follows the reporters, whether the outlet is print, broadcast or digital.

Sources: Capitol News Illinois; AP; Santa Fe New Mexican via Colorado Springs Gazette; Office of Gov. Newsom; Rebuild Local News.

Washington News Fund

Modernizing public notices

Where notices are published

- Washington counties publish legal notices in a court-approved legal newspaper (RCW 65.16).
- Many states are debating a move to government websites. When Florida allowed it, local governments cut newspaper notices 37%, website traffic did not rise, and public meetings drew 14% fewer speakers.
- Middle paths exist. New Jersey now uses government websites plus eligible online news outlets, and Arizona requires both.

Where public outreach dollars go

50% of New York City agency advertising must go to community and ethnic media

- In year one, $9.9M reached more than 220 outlets, 50 of them for the first time.
- Chicago adopted the same 50% goal in 2022.
- This one is in reach for any county. It costs nothing new, and it reaches residents where they already get information.

Sources: RCW 65.16; Munevar, Nakhmurina & Samuels via ProMarket (2026); Public Notice Resource Center; CUNY Center for Community Media.

Washington News Fund

State-funded reporting corps

California

70+

full-time reporters placed through the UC Berkeley fellowship

$25M from the state in 2022, plus $15M more for 2026 to 2028

New Mexico

9 + 11

fellows and interns in the 2025-26 cohort

Running since 2019 with university and state support, reaching rural and nonprofit outlets

New Jersey

$12.9M

granted since 2021 by the Civic Information Consortium

212 grants in 19 of 21 counties. A state budget cut this year shows how fragile public funding can be

Washington built its own version through WSU, which Jody will show you next.

Sources: UC Berkeley Journalism; Rebuild Local News; NJ Civic Information Consortium 2026 Impact Report.

Washington News Fund

What Washington cities and counties are trying

Seattle news vouchers

Proposed

$50 vouchers each resident could give to the local outlets they choose, modeled on Seattle's democracy vouchers

- Mayor Wilson's plan would fund about $10M through a small property tax levy.
- Outlets would need free core content, accuracy standards and independent ownership.
- The ballot measure moved from 2026 to 2027.

Seattle ethnic media outreach

Since 2013, city-funded projects are asked to include ethnic media in outreach plans, and a city office helps departments plan ad buys. There is no spending requirement.

Every county: legal notices

Notices must run in a legal newspaper, bid out yearly where two or more qualify. Counties can add ethnic, online and radio outlets on top.

We found no Washington county with a dedicated local news policy yet.

Sources: PubliCola (June 2026); Free Press Initiative; Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs; NW Asian Weekly; MRSC.

Washington News Fund

What could apply in Washington

Already working

- State-funded Murrow Local News Fellowships through WSU
- A statewide Press Forward chapter, the Washington News Fund, pooling philanthropy for local news
- A full B&O tax exemption for newspaper publishers, through 2034

On the table

- SB 5400, a proposed state grant program for local news jobs, funded by a surcharge on large tech platforms. It did not pass in 2026, and a coalition is working on the next version.
- Seattle's proposed news vouchers, now aimed at a 2027 ballot

In your hands

- Where your notices and outreach dollars go
- How easy it is for reporters, and residents, to follow your meetings and records
- More on this in our closing takeaways

Sources: Washington State Legislature (SB 5400, 2025-26); Press Forward.

Washington News Fund

WSU MURROW FELLOWS

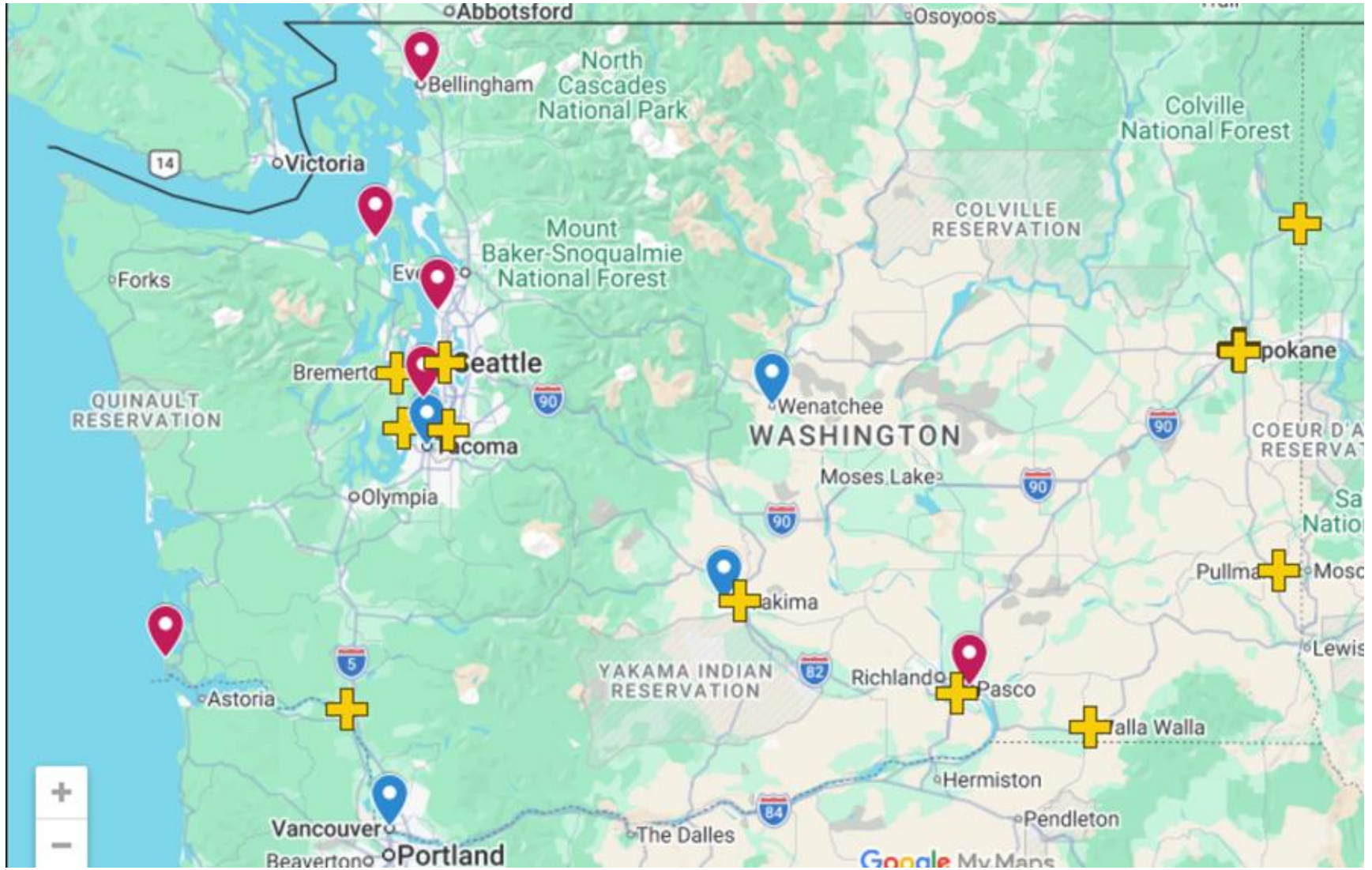
REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

- On the ground in Washington
- Seeding the future workforce
- The drive for 39 …

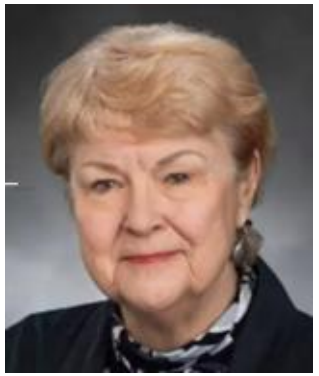
Jody Brannon, Ph.D.

Report for Washington, WSU Murrow College

How the Murrow Local Fellowships came to be



State Sen. Pro tem Karen Keiser, retired, 33rd



State Sen. Marco Liias 21st



WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

All 13 Regions received at least **$415K**, exceeding the **$250K** minimum.



1	North State	8 awards
2	Redwood	6 awards
3	Capital	19 awards
4	Sierra	5 awards
5	Bay Area	61 awards
6	North San Joaquin	8 awards
7	Central San Joaquin	8 awards
8	Central Coast	18 awards
9	Kern County	7 awards
10	Los Angeles County	35 awards
11	Inland SoCal	18 awards
12	Orange County	4 awards
13	Southern Border	17 awards

Evolving from the California model

- Berkeley fellowships
- Legislative dollars + tech funding

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON



Brad B. · 2nd
Retired - Chief Photographer
6d

Connect

Hearing about the Scripps layoffs is sickening. I retired from the profession of journalism, but I'm still deeply invested in the people and the mission of local journalism. Unfortunately, Scripps has once again chosen a path that damages local journalism and the communities it serves.

Layoffs happen in business. But there is something especially troubling about trying to dress up these cuts as a positive development for local journalism.

Let's be clear: **laying off local journalists is bad for local journalism. It's bad for the communities those journalists serve, and it's bad for people who depend on local news to understand what is happening around them and to know the truth. Relying on AI or someone a thousand miles away to understand the community's needs is laughable.**

Local journalists cover our communities, hold institutions accountable, tell the stories that matter, and give a voice to people who might otherwise go unheard. They aren't just positions on a spreadsheet. They are experienced professionals who have dedicated their careers to serving the public.

The role and impact of local reporters

- **7 McClatchy layoffs** in September in WA, including TNT's government and East Pierce Co. reporters
- **5 layoffs** at Wenatchee World/NCW Life in October

WSU MURROW FELLOWS
REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

Local all-stars! 12 of 16 remain in the media industry



Hired by their host newsroom

WSU MURROW FELLOWS
REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

Local watchdogs: what changed after the story ran

Murrow Local News Fellows, 2024–26 · **3,100+ stories** · **19 of Washington's 39 counties** · free to republish

THE COLUMBIAN · WAHKIAKUM CO.

"German royals control 7.3% of Wahkiakum County"

County commissioners weighed timber fees and a foreign-ownership ban; a congresswoman urged reopening the land.

THE NEWS TRIBUNE · PIERCE CO.

"Homeless contracting blunder leads to new oversight of county's Human Services department"

A contracting failure in homelessness services, made public, ended in new oversight of the department.

WENATCHEE WORLD / NWPB · CHELAN CO.

"Chelan County to stop sharing court dates with ICE after courthouse arrest"

Three weeks after her report on an arrest at the courthouse, the county changed its practice.

PORT TOWNSEND LEADER · JEFFERSON CO.

"Mauro's pay higher than reported"

Part of a city-manager pay probe that surprised council members and won a 2025 open-government Key Award.

INVESTIGATEWEST · KING CO.

"Investigation opened into former Mercer Island teacher"

Within hours of the follow-up, the superintendent called police; the school board began a policy review.

MY LYNNWOOD NEWS · SNOHOMISH CO.

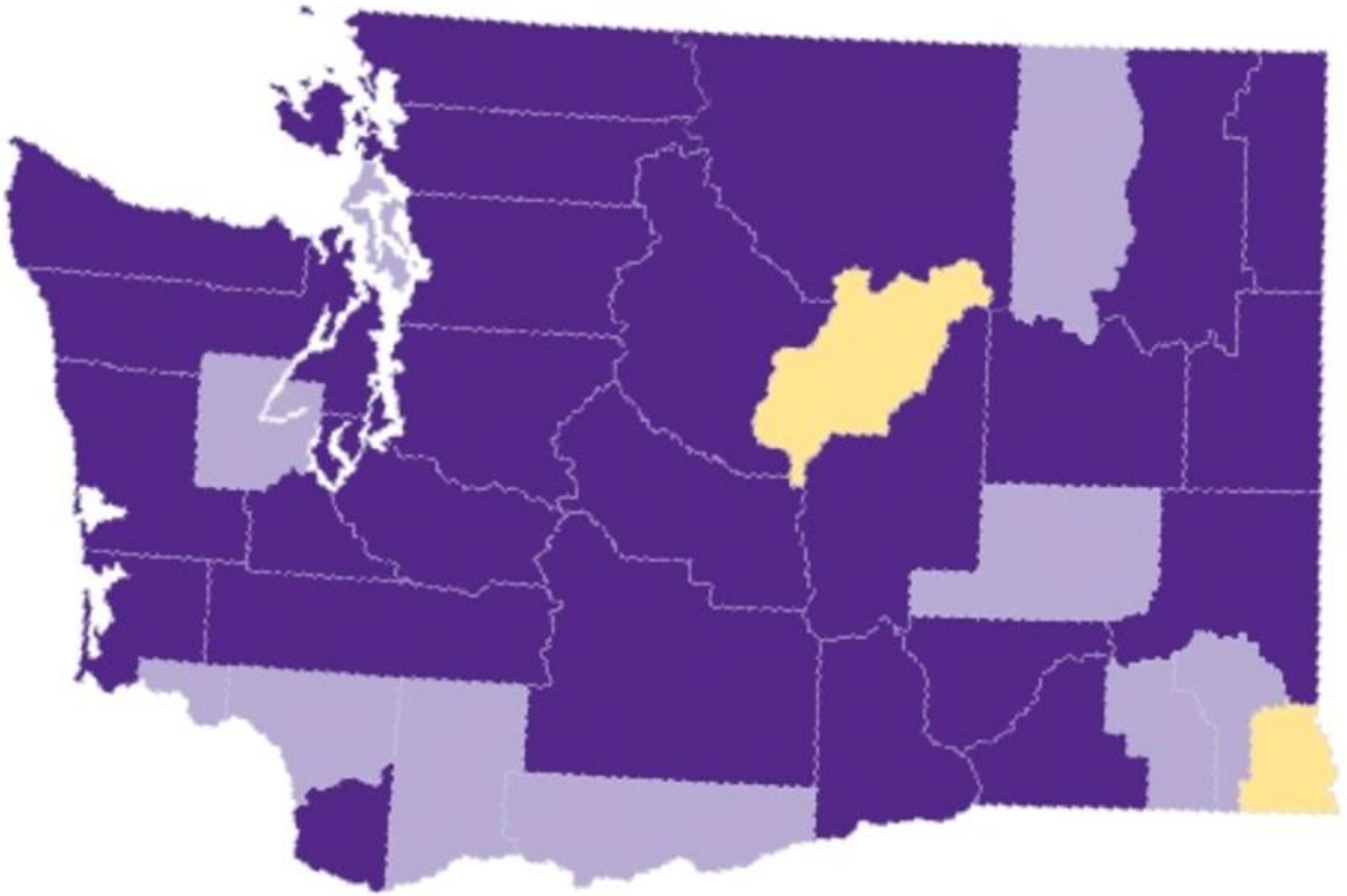
"Thanks to Rick Steves, Lynnwood hygiene center has a permanent home"

Reporting on a struggling homeless hygiene center drew a buyer who kept its doors open.

Headlines as published. Source: Murrow Local News Fellows, Record of Excellence.

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

Reporters in communities across the state



Gold / Zero

Asotin, Douglas

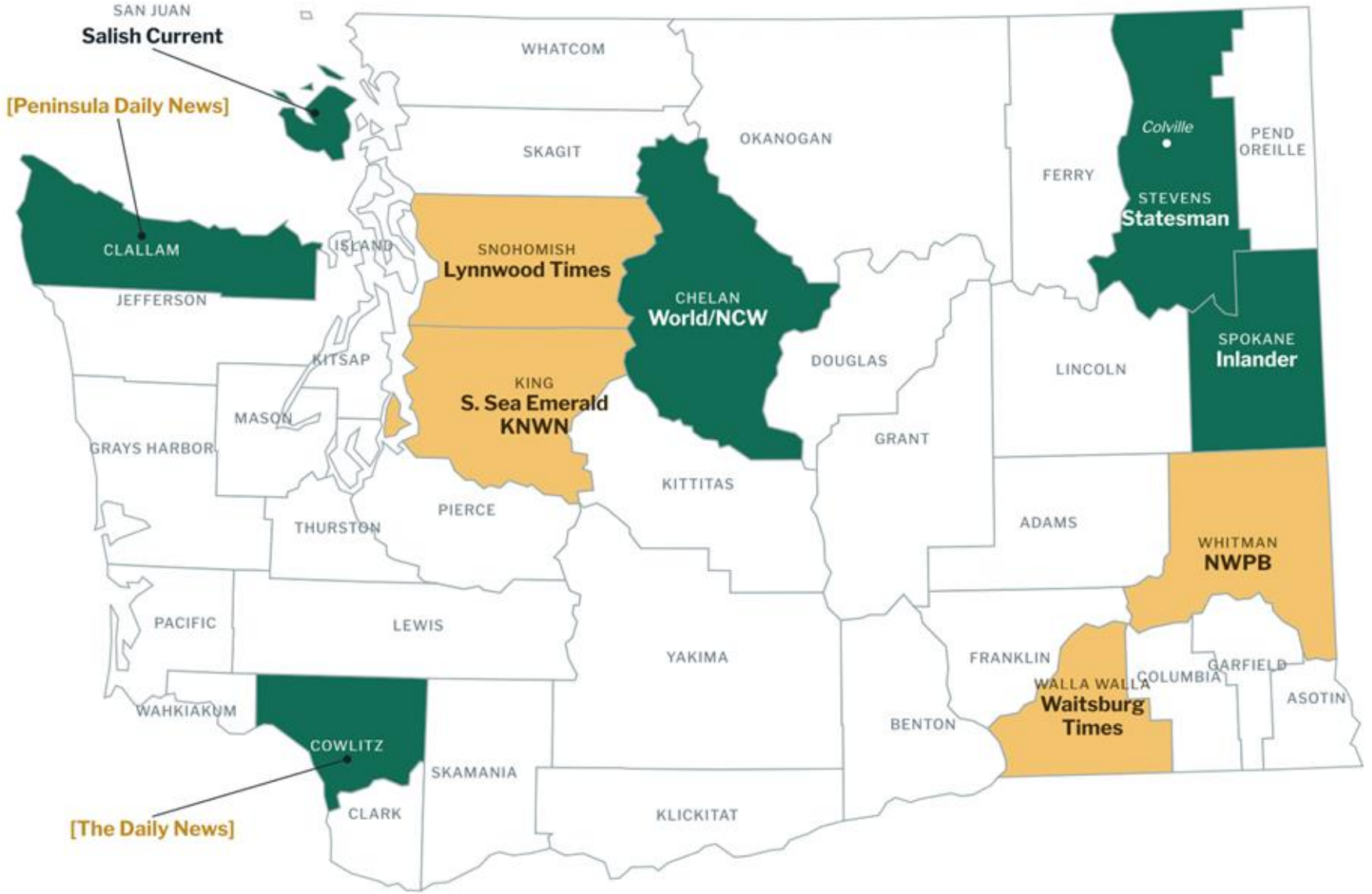
Lilac / One

Adams, Columbia, Cowlitz, Ferry, Garfield, Island, Klickitat, Mason, Skamania, Wahkiakum

SOURCE:: [2026 State of Local News Project](#)
Medill/Northwestern

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

How Report for Washington will work in 2027



RFW newsroom

Accelerator / fundraising coaching

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

Why a reporter in every county is hard

Obstacles to placing reporters where no local publication exists

IN HOST NEWSROOMS

Pay below the cost of living
Host budgets can't reach a livable local wage

Aging leadership
Few successors lined up at owner-run papers

Slow to modernize
Print-era workflows; thin digital and audience tools

No time to learn
Small staffs can't step away to train or mentor

Little left after the grant
Ad and subscriber bases too small to keep the job

IN LIGHTLY POPULATED COUNTIES

Hard to recruit
Few applicants seek rural, isolated postings

No outlet to host the work
Someone must still edit, publish and distribute

Scarce housing
Little rental stock, even when the pay is fair

Long distances
One beat can mean hours of driving each week

Working alone
No nearby colleagues; burnout and turnover follow

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

The cost of going unwatched

What peer-reviewed research finds when local newsrooms close or shrink

$1.1B

extra each year in local-government borrowing costs in U.S. news deserts, passed on to taxpayers

$650K

added interest on a typical bond issue after a newspaper closes where coverage was already thin

$85

higher taxes per resident after closures, along with larger government payrolls

+15%

higher regulatory penalties at local company facilities after the paper closes: pollution, safety, fraud

18 vs. 3

reporters on staff: the bigger newsroom means about one more mayoral candidate and fewer unopposed incumbents

1.9%

more straight-party voting after a local paper closes, as residents judge local races by national labels

Sources: Gao, Lee & Murphy 2020; Rebuild Local News 2026; Heese et al. 2022; Rubado & Jennings 2019; Darr, Hitt & Dunaway 2018

WSU MURROW FELLOWS
REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Takeaways: how you can help

1

Speak up for local news

Talk about why local news matters in budget hearings, town halls and conversations with legislators. When county leaders say it out loud, others listen.

2

Spend where residents read

Get to know the outlets that cover your county, including ethnic, community and digital ones, and place notices and outreach advertising with them.

3

Make your work easy to cover

Post agendas early, stream and archive meetings, and name a contact who answers reporters quickly.

4

Help local news grow

Host a Report for Washington reporter, share the April 2027 matching challenge, and connect us with local donors.

WSNA
WASHINGTON STATE NEWS ALLIANCE

Washington News Fund

WSU MURROW FELLOWS
REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

Let’s keep the conversation going

Questions about local news in your county? We’d love to hear from you.



Sarah Gustavus Lim

Washington State News Alliance

sgustavus@gmail.com



Kaarin Austin

Washington News Fund

kaarin@wanewsfund.org



Jody Brannon

WSU MURROW FELLOWS REPORT FOR WASHINGTON

jody.brannon@wsu.edu