



THE NEWSGUILD – CWA

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July 22, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell,

As a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local news industry is facing an extinction-level event at a critical moment for our country, when Americans must be informed about an unprecedented public health and economic crisis from local community-based publications. As a former reporter and president of The NewsGuild, a union representing more than 24,000 American journalists, I would like to draw your attention to the plight of “Main Street media,” by which I mean the thousands of newspapers and websites serving small towns and communities outside of the nation’s media capitals and large metropolitan areas.

The importance of small- and mid-sized news outlets has never been more starkly apparent than in the past few months, as our country fights through a pandemic and an economic downturn. That downturn has hit the news industry hard, with many outlets reporting losses of up to 40% of advertising revenue this spring. That decline in ad revenue has led to layoffs, furloughs and reduced publication of news at a time when readers are looking for information that can save lives: where to go to be tested; infection rates and hospital capacities; and stories of heroism, self-sacrifice and hope. Many of the smallest news organizations have found a lifeline in the form of the Paycheck Protection Program, with more than 450 news organizations in each of the 50 states receiving PPP loans under the CARES Act. But many small-town papers and broadcasters are part of national chains, which have too many employees nationwide to be eligible for PPP loans.

To put it in terms that will matter to your constituents, many of Kentucky’s largest newspapers are owned by national chains. Since April, Gannett, the nation’s largest newspaper chain, has furloughed its journalists at all 261 newspapers it owns an average of one week per month—meaning on any given day, 25% of the reporters are at home, not working, not getting paid and not covering issues important to Kentuckians. The situation is as bad or worse in other media outposts in communities across the country: every “daily” newspaper in Wyoming has canceled at least one day of printing; more than 50 newspapers across the country have shut down permanently since the start of the pandemic.

I urge your support for The Local News and Emergency Information Act of 2020, S.B. 3718, a bi-partisan bill introduced this spring by Sen. John Boozman (R-Arkansas) and Maria Cantwell (D-Washington) that would expand eligibility to PPP loans for news organizations based on the payroll needs at a specific

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geographic location. Tying this much needed aid to payroll is crucial, targeted and designed to sustain news coverage through the immediate crisis. News organizations across the U.S. have seen staffing cut to the bone even before the pandemic, and every newsroom job is crucial. Any form of aid to the news industry must be targeted to sustaining the essential role that news outlets play in our communities. And taxpayers will benefit from this infusion of aid, in the form of more news and more thorough reporting. Aid that can be applied to the bottom line of news corporations as they choose without finding its way to individual, local newsrooms is not sustaining a public service. It would be a bailout for massive corporations.

The essential importance of a free and vibrant press has been an acknowledged feature of American democracy enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution. And from the dawn of the Republic, newspapers received preferential postal rates, government support for the vital role of the press in building an informed citizenry.

Local voices will be diminished with each local news outlet that shutter, and the perspective that shapes opinion about a small community will come from national outlets. When journalists are not working because they are sidelined by furloughs and layoffs, news goes unreported and Americans are uninformed. The vacuum of information is filled with fear, rumor and strife, mediated by technological media platforms based thousands of miles away.

I urge you and Senate leadership to include the provisions of the Local News and Emergency Information Act, S. 3718, into the next recovery package, and allow every news outlet in America to return its journalists to the streets of our cities and towns. This assistance can save jobs, save lives and save our democracy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jon Schleuss', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Schleuss
President
The NewsGuild