



Lens on Lightfoot: Accomplishments, impact and areas for improvement

Introduction

The news ecosystem in Chicago is unique, groundbreaking and essential. Collaboration already thrives in the city, but we wondered — how could power be better held accountable if seven news organizations worked together? The [Lens on Lightfoot](#) collaboration, led by INN, looked at how Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s policies and proposals align with promises she made on the campaign trail and during her first year in office.

The project brought together INN members Better Government Association, Block Club Chicago, Chalkbeat Chicago and The Chicago Reporter, as well as La Raza, The Daily Line and The TRIiBE. These stories were published as part of an ongoing series from November 19, 2019 to November 9, 2020, a little less than a year of publication.

Organically, the 50 text-based stories from Lens on Lightfoot had an average of more than 3,100 unique visitors per story from partner publications, plus additional print circulation. Two community events connected readers to this collaboration, one held in person with more than 100 attendees and one held online because of the COVID-19 pandemic with more than 7,000 cumulative views. Reporting in this series led to further reporting from broadcast and radio outlets in Chicago. Stories from Lens on Lightfoot were published by 10 outlets in the Midwest and four national/niche outlets, including Politico. In addition, we found 666 instances of social promotion and/or other forms of sharing these stories by various stakeholders, including politicians, community news groups, advocacy groups, legal groups and more.

How did we find this data?

For organic reach, we asked participants to send over engagement data from their sites and social accounts.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of “Lens on Lightfoot.” We also searched for the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater's social feature using the same search terms as well as the first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension. We also asked participants to send over engagement data from their organizations' accounts.

For collaborators' feedback, we sent out a Google Form and requested specific data from a participant at each organization.

Why did we do this collaboration?

We believe that collaboration can help lead to greater attention, reach and impact. And by bringing journalists together, we help create a bigger pot of resources to tell complex stories in a detailed and responsible way. Keeping government officials accountable is essential for a fairly running democracy. We want anyone interested in how their government is being run to have access to that information — that's public service journalism. We want nonprofit newsrooms to have as few barriers to entry as possible for editorial collaborations, so we're here to help. For more, read our [blog post here](#).

How did we do this collaboration?

As with our other collaborations, this project moved in phases, starting in summer 2019, shortly after Lightfoot became mayor:

The phases of the project:

- Identify and reach out to potential partners
- Arrange regular Zoom meetings with partners
- Agree on communication protocol and tools
- Prepare, reach agreement and sign MOU outlining terms of partnership
- Reach consensus on title and logo
- Draft editorial calendar
- Create distribution plan
- Create social media and promotion plan
- Share content with distribution partners
- Publish

How was this collaboration funded?

The Lens on Lightfoot project was funded by INN's Amplify News Project and the project partners, with dedicated project funding from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing — is funded by generous support from the Robert R. McCormick

Foundation in Chicago and the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest. The project partners also contributed their own resources to make the project possible.

Content Reach & Distribution

Content reach — Original audiences

INN members Better Government Association, Block Club Chicago, Chalkbeat Chicago and The Chicago Reporter as well as non-INN members The Daily Line, La Raza and The TRiiBE are the partners in the Lens on Lightfoot collaboration. Before this collaboration concluded, The Chicago Reporter was put on hiatus and its editor and publisher was let go. That influenced the Reporter’s ability to complete all its planned stories, and also kept us from getting access to the reach of the stories it did publish.

The organic digital reach of the stories was fairly high, though not all outlets could report all of the data. Some of these outlets are small and don’t have the resources to track this data. In order to help standardize the data and reduce the lift for some of the outlets that published a large number of stories, we asked all outlets for metrics for four stories, or as many published if four or less total, and calculated the average unique page views and average engaged time on a story page.

The cumulative shares and comments on Facebook were collected by INN for all stories published as part of the collaboration.

Outlet	# of stories in collab	Average unique page views	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments
Better Government Association	8 (including two co-published with Block Club Chicago)	3,319	14:18	393	256
Block Club Chicago	16 (including two co-published with Better Government Association and one co-published)	5,521	3:50	2,037	1,053

	with The Daily Line				
Chalkbeat Chicago	8	1,448	5:45	120	138
Chicago Reporter	2	Could not provide	Could not provide	2,199	518
The Daily Line	12 (including one story co-published with Block Club Chicago)	Could not provide	Could not provide	203	109
La Raza	4	2,113	1:24	31	0
The TRiIBE	3	Could not provide	Could not provide	59	47

All stories from La Raza were also included in their print editions, with a circulation at a time of the start of the Lens on Lightfoot project of 153,000 copies per week and of 41,000 copies per week in the last months of the project. That added a significant reach to La Raza's stories.

Engagement & Additional Reach



Outside of the traditional text-based storytelling, The TRiIBE also hosted two community engagement events throughout the series.

The first event, "[TRiIBE Tuesday: Can Lori Lightfoot transform Chicago?](#)," was hosted in person on January 14, 2020. The event brought together partners to discuss the Lens on Lightfoot

project and Lightfoot's progress as mayor with Chicago residents. The event was well attended with 800 people registered, resulting in standing room-only. This event highlighted the

importance of this collaboration in bringing a comprehensive look at the mayoral office in 2020. It also brought together the journalists who would work together for the next nine months.

The second event, "[TRiiBE Tuesday: A Town Hall with Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot](#)," was the culmination of the series. On September 29, 2020, The TRiiBE hosted Mayor Lori Lightfoot virtually as journalists from each partner newsroom questioned her administration's actions during her first year. The partners also asked for questions from Chicago residents. Panelists pressed the mayor on issues they reported on, including environmental racism, the impact of COVID-19 on mental health in the Hispanic and African-American communities, gun violence and school budget reform.

This is currently the most popular video on The TRiiBE's [Facebook](#) page with more than 6,400 views, 64 comments and 125 shares. The video was also streamed on [YouTube](#), where it received 1,074 views. It's the third most popular video on The TRiiBE's YouTube page.

In addition to republication of the original stories, this reporting resulted in further reporting from wider Chicago broadcast and radio stations:

- Lightfoot at Odds with Allies Over Push to Create Elected Board to Oversee CPD ([WTTW-TV](#))
- Why is CPD Interim Superintendent Charlie Beck suspending the merit promotion system? ([WGN Radio](#))
- The Daily Line's Heather Cherone: "Mayor Lori Lightfoot has had a very tough first six months in office" ([WGN Radio](#))

WTTW-TV and WGN Radio both bring a massive reach with broadcast audiences. 1.8 million PBS viewers are reached weekly on WTTW11, [according to their site](#), and WGN Radio has a cume of 314,800, according to Nielsen ratings.

Additionally, according to Meltwater estimates, the unique visitors for these two sites alone pushes 740,000 unique visitors. It's certain that not that many people saw it, but even 1% means 7,400 unique visitors were introduced to this series. Additionally, [Block Club Chicago](#) did further reporting using the Lens on Lightfoot event as well, as did student newspaper Columbia Chronicle.

Better Government Association reported that there was some feedback from the Lightfoot administration that they were moving to get environmental campaign promises done faster after the "[Lightfoot's Actions on Environmental Campaign Promises Are Off to a Slow Start](#)" story was published.

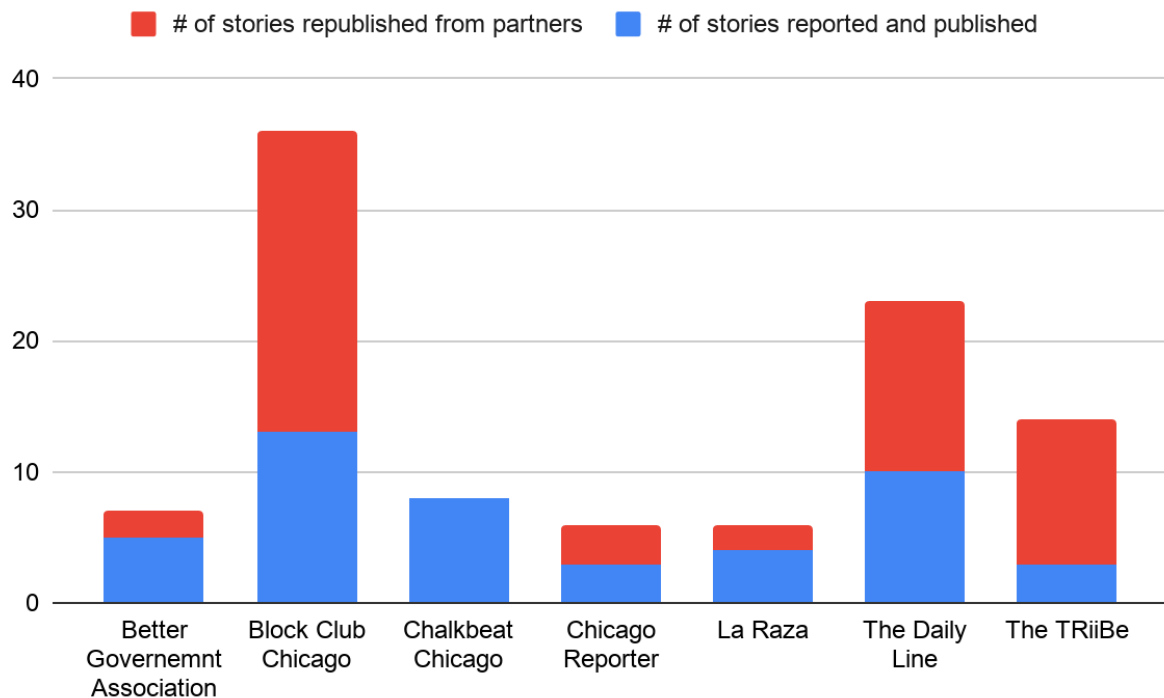
We're well aware that the collaborative space is saturated with excellent projects across the spectrum of journalism. We're proud that the Lens on Lightfoot collaboration was a finalist for

the [2020 EPPY Awards](#) for Best Community Service on a Website with less than 1 million unique monthly visitors.

We're also thrilled that Asraa Mustufa, former Digital Editor at The Chicago Reporter, had the opportunity to give a lightning talk about this collaboration at the Center for Cooperative Media's [2020 Collaborative Journalism Summit](#).

Content distribution — Republication

The primary goal of this project was to have free, fact-based, high-quality reporting that held the Lightfoot administration accountable as an accessible resource for Chicago participants to further the news ecosystem in Chicago. We found that the reporting in this collaboration was widely recirculated by other partners in this collaboration, something we consider a win for this project.



(The chart above does not include the four stories that were written in partnerships: Better Government Association / Block Club Chicago, Better Government Association / The Daily Line and Block Club Chicago / The Daily Line. See below for specific stories.)

Some notable points: Block Club Chicago, which may have the largest organic audience of the group, recirculated almost 66% of stories published by other partners. The organizations that republished frequently have a broader focus than those that published a few or no stories, which

is to be expected. The median recirculation rate for republishing stories from partner outlets was 100%.

In addition, [Block Club Chicago](#) and [La Raza](#) both republished stories translated into Spanish through [Translating Chicago](#), a separate translation project organized by INN that's currently still in progress. The goal of this initiative is to increase the amount of high-quality content available to Spanish-speakers in Chicago.

The Lens on Lightfoot stories also permeated the larger Chicago media ecosystem. Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune and Illinois's Patch.com sites all republished at least one story.

The most notable national outlet that promoted the series and its stories was Politico, which promoted the Chalkbeat Chicago story "[Pre-K for all: COVID-19 battle slows pace of Chicago preschool expansion](#)" in its [Illinois Playbook newsletter](#), which rounds up the latest in the Chicago and Illinois political sphere. Giving Compass also shared a story, as did aggregation sites morrisbroadband.net and NWCable.net. Great Lakes Now, a project housed at INN member Detroit Public TV that covers the Great Lakes region, republished two stories that had an environmental focus.

Using Meltwater, we can estimate the number of unique visitors to a website per month. The sites that recirculated content from the partnership have a cumulative monthly audience of close to 70 million unique visitors. While it's certain that nowhere near that many people saw these stories, even 1% of that audience would mean 700,000 people outside of regular distribution channels could have seen the story. Not all sites in the collaboration are listed in Meltwater's system, so the estimated reach from Meltwater is on the smaller side.

In 2019, the population in Chicago was 2.71 million people. If 700,000 saw a story from this collaboration, reporting from this collaboration could have reached almost 26% of the city's residents. That's excluding any reach from social media.

An overview of where these stories were distributed is below - the full distribution findings [can be found here](#).

Story	Outlet	# of unique outlets that recirculated
Lightfoot's Effort To Scale Back Aldermanic Prerogative a Work in Progress	The Daily Line	2
Lightfoot's Actions on Environmental Campaign	Better Government Association	4

Promises Are Off to a Slow Start		
Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot promised to spend more money on students in need. Could change be imminent?	Chalkbeat Chicago	4
Lightfoot's got a Jon Burge problem: The legacy of torture in the Chicago Police Department	The TRiBE	0
Revamped Neighborhood Opportunity Fund Accepting Applications With A Priority On South And West Sides	Block Club Chicago	1
Chicago mulls how to reslice the school budget pie — but what about a bigger pie?	Chalkbeat Chicago	0
Suburban lawmaker introduces bill to end aldermanic prerogative in Chicago	The Daily Line	1
After Rahm's 'Smoke And Mirrors,' Lightfoot Claims Neighborhood Opportunity Fund As Her Own	Block Club Chicago / The Daily Line	0
Aldermen advance Lightfoot's plan to revamp Neighborhood Opportunity Fund	The Daily Line	1
'Art Can Change Your Life': A Gallery With Studios, Lessons And Shows Coming To West Side	Block Club Chicago	0
Lightfoot incrementa la protección a inmigrantes en Chicago, pero persiste la colaboración con ICE en casos penales / Mayor Lightfoot boosts protection for immigrants, but collaboration	La Raza	2

between Chicago Police and ICE continues in criminal cases		
Here's what to watch in Chicago's school budget revamp	Chalkbeat Chicago	0
A testimony of anti-immigrant harassment and a cry for protection in Chicago / Un testimonio de acoso antiinmigrante y el clamor por protección en Chicago	La Raza	0
Residents await Lightfoot's master plan on affordable housing as citywide crisis deepens	The Daily Line	0
Student Protesters Demand Lightfoot Live Up To Campaign Promises on Environmental Protection	Better Government Association	4
Lightfoot Facing Off Against ComEd Over the Future	Better Government Association	2
Woodlawn Residents, City Officials Call For Quick Action To Protect Affordable Housing Near Obama Center	Block Club Chicago	0
South Shore Neighbors Blindsided As Plan To Turn Closed School Into Police Training Center Is Resurrected	Block Club Chicago	0
Lightfoot Pushing to Make TIFs More Equitable but Changes Lacking for Critics She's Tried to Win Over	Better Government Association / The Daily Line	3
A look at both sides of the fight for equity in Chicago's legal cannabis industry	The TRiiBE	0

Chicago intercepts tax refunds to collect unpaid debt, hitting poor black areas the hardest	Chicago Reporter	3
Pre-K for all: COVID-19 battle slows pace of Chicago preschool expansion	Chalkbeat Chicago	1
Healthy Marketplace Planned For Englewood Gets Boost With \$1.75 Million City Grant	Block Club Chicago	0
Email Strings Show City Officials Warned of Health Risks Before Little Village Demolition Fiasco	Block Club Chicago / Better Government Association	2
Chicago police arrested more people for protesting than for looting in early days of unrest, contradicting original claims	Chicago Reporter	2
Chicago says it will reform school budgeting. Can efforts survive a pandemic?	Chalkbeat Chicago	2
‘Only Time Will Tell’ If Lightfoot’s Sustainability Czar Can Move the Needle on Environmental Justice	Better Government Association	5
More Than 30 South, West Side Businesses Awarded Neighborhood Opportunity Fund Grants	Block Club Chicago	0
Advocates push for expansion of mental healthcare to Latino communities / Trabajan para ampliar los limitados servicios de salud mental en comunidades hispanas en Chicago	La Raza	3 (2 republications in English, one in Spanish)
How Lightfoot and housing	The Daily Line	2

activists reached an uneasy détente in the battle for Woodlawn's future		
City Awards 1,500 Grants To Small Businesses Decimated By Coronavirus, Vandalism	Block Club Chicago	0
After string of safety problems at Chicago early childhood centers, feds take notice	Chalkbeat Chicago	1
Chicago is spending \$50M to get low-income students online. What if parents don't trust a free deal?	Chalkbeat Chicago	4
City Council Approves Woodlawn Affordable Housing Ordinance Near Obama Center: 'A Step In The Right Direction'	Block Club Chicago	1
South, West Side Business Owners Can Now Apply For \$250,000 Neighborhood Opportunity Fund Grants	Block Club Chicago	0
Council tensions linger over Lightfoot's ongoing battle against 'aldermanic prerogative'	The Daily Line	1
None Of The City's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund Grants Went To North Lawndale Last Round	Block Club Chicago	0
As Chicago Scrambled in Early Days of Coronavirus, Political Ties Helped Win No-Bid Contracts	Better Government Association	0
Lightfoot Defends City's Actions on Little Village Smokestack Demolition: 'I Don't Believe We Were	Better Government Association / Block Club Chicago	1 (also published in Spanish by BCC)

Negligent'		
Lightfoot on reopening CPS: We're 'following very closely' the experience of Catholic schools	Chalkbeat Chicago	3
VIDEO: Mayor Lightfoot Fields Questions From 'Lens On Lightfoot' Collaboration	Block Club Chicago	0
Lightfoot 'moving on' from GAPA police oversight proposal, pledges to introduce 'alternative' plan	The Daily Line	1
What did the "Lens on Lightfoot" edition of TRiiBE Tuesday tell us about the mayor's relationship with indie media and the communities they represent?	The TRiiBE	0
Northwest Side affordable housing proposal tests Lightfoot's resolve on 'aldermanic privilege'	The Daily Line	2
'Backroom Deal' Ward Maps Help Politicians And Harm Communities, Neighbors Say — But Will Lightfoot Deliver Redistricting Reform?	Block Club Chicago	0
What would a graduated income tax mean for Chicago?	The Daily Line	1
Aldermen probe languishing police oversight plans as Lightfoot's 'alternative' proposal lies in wait	The Daily Line	1
Work and controversies of the Chicago COVID-19 official responses / Acciones y controversias en la respuesta oficial de Chicago	La Raza	0

ante el covid-19		
Activists Build Tent City To Show What Could Happen Without Affordable Housing Around Obama Library	Block Club Chicago	1
Chicago Has Been Quietly Intercepting Millions from State Tax Refunds During the Pandemic	The Chicago Reporter	3

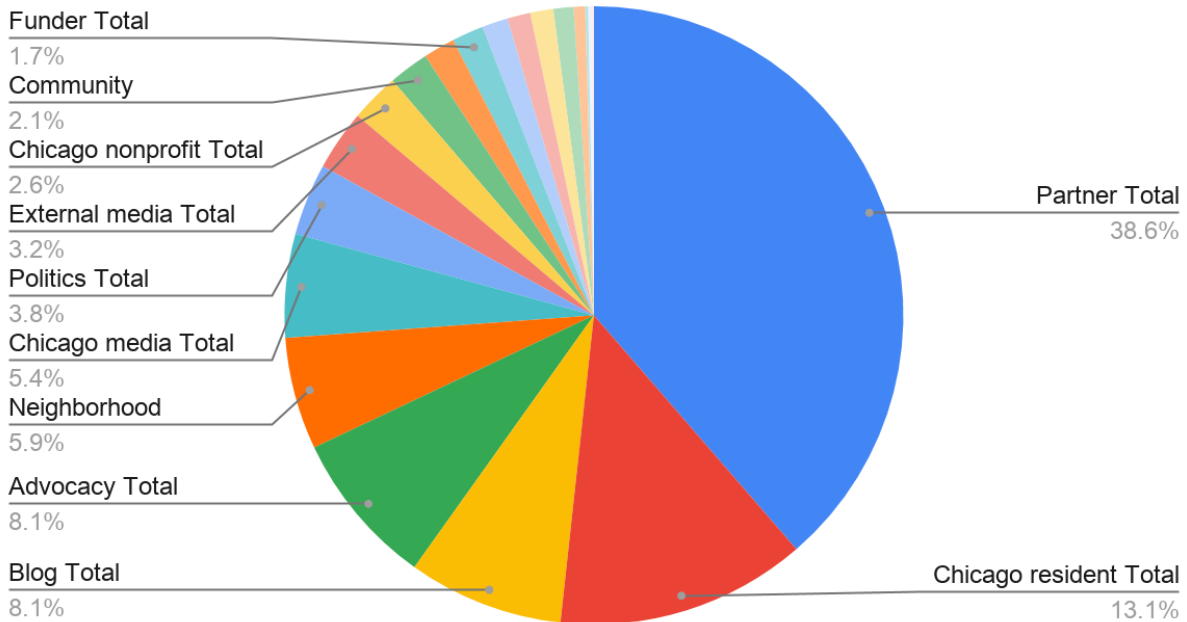
30 out of 50 stories in this series were republished by at least one other outlet.

Social media distribution

Promotion came from all partners, including INN accounts. INN promoted the series through multiple tweets throughout the series, which were seen over 16,700 times, according to Twitter analytics. We posted on Facebook and LinkedIn as well, where we have smaller audiences: we reached 593 users and 425 users, respectively.

For this collaboration, partner promotion generated the most attention, with outlet accounts or journalists within the outlet promoting the series.

Breakdown of social stakeholders for Lens on Lightfoot



Especially as our goal was to get public service-oriented reporting into the wider Chicago ecosystem, we're excited to find that these stories were distributed to Chicago residents and neighborhood groups in relatively large amounts. We found that Chicago residents or Chicago-interested stakeholders were excited about this collaboration, with 82 unique Twitter accounts tweeting or retweeting stories. To show the support for information on a hyperlocal level, 20 groups or pages focused on community news and updates on Facebook and Twitter shared stories, often more than once. These included groups such as Illinois Citizens Against Government Overreach, La Villita Chicago, Members First Open Forum, Pilsen Chicago, R.A.G.E - Resident Association of Greater Englewood and more. Often, stories posted in these forums have higher engagement as posts are curated by community members themselves.

Chicago and Illinois area politicians were well aware of this collaboration. Chicago politicians Ald. Raymond Lopez and Ald. Stephanie D. Coleman shared stories from this collaboration, as did State Representative Deanne Mazzochi. Additionally, this series reached folks who previously ran for Chicago offices, including former City Council candidates [Zerlina Smith](#) and [Neftalie Gonzalez](#) and former U.S. Senate candidate [Mark Curran](#).

We're also excited this information made it to change-makers across Chicago via advocacy groups, nonprofits and law groups. Indivisible Illinois, Green Latinos, Chicago Food Policy Action Council, Illinois Policy, National Institute for Early Education Research, Food & Water Watch - Midwest and United Working Families are just a few examples of the 44 unique advocacy groups that shared at least one story. Greater Chatham Alliance and Friends of the

Parks are two of the eight community organizations. Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, DePaul University Rinn Law Library, First Defense Legal Aid and National Resource Defence Council are four of the seven law stakeholders that shared at least one story.

Chicago-based media organizations or journalists didn't hesitate to share these stories. Twenty nine unique accounts shared or posted about Lens on Lightfoot stories, including the Chicago Chapter of National Association of Black Journalists, Chicago Journalism Association, Public Narrative, Chicago Public Square, Mike Flannery of FOX32 and more. Other INN members in Chicago also shared, including Injustice Watch's Editor-in-Chief, Adeshina Emmanuel.

External media — media outlets or reporters outside of the Chicago area — also recirculated stories from this collaboration. We're excited to see our peers Chris Krewson of LION, Center for Cooperative Media, Nieman Lab, Report for America, Type Investigations, Gozamos, [Allison Dikanovic of The City](#) and more share this collaboration.

For a full look into the social distribution we found, [dive in here](#).

Collaboration feedback

It's important to us to make sure we're doing all we can in order to make these collaborations run smoothly. Through our feedback form, we asked the partners to rank their experiences from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on different aspects of the project management, from quality of journalism produced to the editing process to likelihood of participating in an INN collaboration in the future. A breakdown of what we found:

Generally very positive feedback on how the collaboration was managed. The average responses from five of our editorial partners, excluding The Chicago Reporter and Chalkbeat Chicago:

Overall success of this collaboration for your newsroom: 4.2

Quality of journalism overall: 4.4

Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom: 4.4

Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.): 4.4

Ability to get questions answered: 4.6

Ability to get concerns resolved: 4.8

Distribution process: 4.2

Pickup by news organizations outside the collaboration: 3

Likelihood that you will follow up on this story: 3.8

Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future: 4

All partners responded that this collaboration helped them to cover the Lightfoot administration more thoroughly than their organization could have done alone, which was a win.

Below is some verbatim feedback from our participants:

“It was an effective collaboration that touched on many subjects, brought many newsrooms together and helped document a historic first year for Mayor Lori Lightfoot.”

“I think overall it was a very good collaboration. I'd like to see a more cohesive effort after the stories are produced to amplify all this collective work.”

“I am sorry I did not keep more robust records on our stories. Please know that every story we published with this collaboration received more attention than it would have if we did not. For that we are appreciative.”

“Some doctors and clinics did retweets of the English version of the La Raza story republished by Block Club Chicago.”

“Something like this is best for newsrooms like Block Club Chicago, who have the means -- financially and staff-wise -- to cover this topic extensively. We contributed what we could, but we just don't have the capacity to really dig into covering City Hall the way we would like to.”

“The work by organizations such as the TRiiBE and La Raza did important contributions to a more diverse coverage, and other participants did significant work in this regard too.”

Challenges & Observations for the Future

This was the second long-term collaboration INN was involved in and the first that INN led — this was also INN's longest collaboration to date. Since this collaboration ended, we've met with other collaboration leaders and learned how others are tracking metrics for long-term projects. This led us to establish a new method for collecting participant data as the stories are published, easing the lift of the collaboration partners to provide all reporting at the end of the project. We wish this was established during the Lens on Lightfoot project to make the metrics sharing process easier on the partners.

From our experiences with this and other collaborations, one component of content sharing that seems to be important is building personal relationships before pitching the project. In the future, it would be interesting to explore the results of seeking one-on-one meetings with large players within a news ecosystem to explain the process and editorial standards before starting the distribution process.

Overall, we're excited about the results from the Lens on Lightfoot project. Our goal with this collaboration was to strengthen the news ecosystem in Chicago and make accountability journalism more accessible to all residents. By bringing these outlets together to not only plan

and share story ideas, but make the resulting stories accessible to all partners, we saw a wider reach for these stories. Because these outlets all have different audiences, we are confident that new readers were introduced to these stories.