



## INN supports City Bureau pilot of new civic newsletter

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A new daily newsletter from City Bureau’s community reporting network was already a “smash success” a month after launch.

With support from the Institute for Nonprofit News, at the start of 2021 City Bureau piloted a daily Chicago Documenters newsletter, [Newswire](#), which synthesizes public meeting coverage, opportunities for civic involvement and local news.



Newswire [launched publicly](#) on May 25. Direct traffic and Google search traffic to Documenters.org (tracked as the same behavior) have increased by 50% since the launch and numerous community organizations and journalists have used and promoted the newsletter.

“We can say early on that people are definitely engaging with it, they’re definitely finding new sources and ways to engage and connect with civic life through it,” said City Bureau co-founder and News Lab Director Darryl

Holliday.

### Civic engagement in action

City Bureau leaders had faced challenges disseminating the information gathered by its [Documenters](#), who attend government meetings.

In October 2020, INN’s Amplify Collaboration Editor Sharon McGowan reached out to City Bureau to discuss opportunities to work together. Holliday explained that he was interested in inviting Chicago newsrooms to provide feedback on the planned pilot newsletter, and McGowan and Holliday worked together to recruit Chalkbeat, Block Club, South Side Weekly, Austin

Weekly and Univision to participate. City Bureau also recruited community organizations and individuals to provide input. The pilot was funded by a grant from the [Robert R. McCormick Foundation](#).

Throughout the pilot phase, from January to May 2021, City Bureau collected feedback that included 73 survey responses, 17 individual interviews with cohort members and a group interview with Documenters. The results drove the format and content of the final newsletter template.

One of the biggest content shifts as a result of the feedback was providing more context on the issues discussed at the meetings, said Nalani Saito, Documenters program manager. In addition, City Bureau fine-tuned the “Get Involved” section to make it more prominent.

“It feels more like we’re guiding the civic engagement process,” Saito said. “It’s not just, ‘Here’s this information,’ but ‘Here’s this information and why you should care.’”

**Each “Newswire” has five main components:**

1. Key takeaways from Chicago Documenters coverage of public meetings in Chicago and Cook County
2. A list of upcoming meetings that Documenters are covering
3. Additional information and context on past meetings of particular interest
4. Opportunities to get involved civically—for example volunteer opportunities, trainings, petitions to sign, etc.
5. Local civic news

*“Welcome to the Newswire by Chicago Documenters” email, May 2021*

Newswire is designed for people interested in participating in Chicago’s civic life, such as organizers, educators, community members and journalists needing to keep up with public meetings.

“While anyone can sift through the thousands of records Documenters have compiled, we recognize that many people don’t have the time or capacity to do that digging. So we’re doing it for you,” wrote Saito in her welcome message to subscribers.

“We see the Newswire as an exciting new way to engage with Documenters content; a pipeline for key civic topics delivered to your inbox every morning.”

## Immediate impact

Saito called the first month after the public launch a success, as Documenters.org experienced:

- a 26% jump in daily active users
- a 29% increase in new users
- a 13% increase in total sessions.

Readers are also finding the content valuable, as Newswire's clickthrough rate is nearly 10 times higher than City Bureau's newsletter average.

Newswire content has already been featured by organizations including [South Side Weekly](#), [Raise Your Hand](#) and City Cast Chicago. Notable praise on social media has included posts from WBEZ government and politics reporter [Kristen Schorsch](#), the [Chicago Independent Media Alliance](#), City Bureau board member and executive director at the Northwestern University Knight Lab [Joe Germuska](#) and [Josh Stearns](#), program director of the Public Square Program at Democracy Fund.

In June, Detroit Documenters started their own Newswire, informed by the Chicago pilot.

"This gets back to the original purpose of Documenters, which is to inspire civic engagement however we can," Saito said.

## Future growth

City Bureau team members plan to prioritize audience growth as they explore the reach and impact of Newswire as a civic tool.

The organization sees opportunity for the newsletter to strengthen the existing community of 700 Documenters in Chicago, as well as providing a model for more Documenters sites to launch newsletters of their own. City Bureau has trained more than 1,000 Documenters in Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland.

"We're all hoping to see more of those examples, more organizers using it and more journalists using it as a newswire service," Holliday said. "The response has been great. I think we have a lot of potential and room to grow it."