

**Institute for  
Nonprofit News**

## **Life After COVID: Largest INN collaboration to date uncovers dramatic effects of COVID**

### Introduction

“AC: Life After COVID” was INN’s most ambitious editorial collaboration to date. By combining the reporting power of 15 newsrooms, the project revealed how the pandemic affected policies and practices related to a range of issues, and examined what more needs to be done.

Participating newsrooms were The Beacon/ KCUR 89.3; Bridge Michigan/Side Effects Public Media; Cicero Independiente/South Side Weekly; Detour Detroit/Planet Detroit/Tostada Magazine; Evanston RoundTable/Growing Community Media; Madison 365/Wausau Pilot & Review and MinnPost/Sahan Journal. The series ran from June 28 through July 9, 2021, and included 21 stories.

Notable findings included:

- Vaccination rates in at least seven predominantly Black and Latinx suburbs in Cook County, Illinois, that were targeted for the county’s vaccination equity efforts lagged far behind whiter, more affluent suburbs. (Cicero Independiente/South Side Weekly)
- Decarceration efforts, once almost unthinkable, made speedy progress because of the high rate of the virus in Wisconsin’s prisons (Wausau Pilot & Review and Madison365)
- While advice to stay at home during the pandemic was meant to keep people healthy, it put some Kansas City residents at risk because of rodents, mold and other unhealthy conditions in their homes. (KCUR 89.3 and The Beacon)
- Since the onset of COVID, the volume of children and teens with acute depression or other behavioral emergencies increased dramatically. A shortage of child psychiatrists and therapists and not nearly enough inpatient beds mean ER nurses and doctors often doubled as guardians, minders and care coordinators — for days or even weeks at a time. (Side Effects Public Media and Bridge Michigan)

INN launched the collaboration as part of its Amplify News Project, which expands news distribution and creates a culture of collaboration across the Midwest. Our work has established

regular story sharing and organic collaboration across INN's growing network of Midwest members — with one another and with other newsrooms such as community newspapers, public media and local broadcasters. Our model of fostering high-impact, member-driven collaborative journalism has strengthened nonprofit news and informed the region and country about important issues across the Midwest.

“AC: Life After COVID” originated when Amplify Collaborations Editor Sharon McGowan reached out to a half dozen newsrooms in six states (out of the roughly 40 INN members in the Midwest) to gauge interest in the project. With their feedback and guidance as the basis, all Midwest INN newsrooms were invited to submit project proposals. Twenty-five newsrooms submitted proposals to work in teams of two or three on their stories. So many proposals came in that INN doubled the size of the collaboration, with additional support reallocated from within the Amplify News Project. The resulting series covered the economic impact of COVID on Latino immigrants, the criminal justice system, housing and homelessness, mental health, equity in COVID testing and vaccinations, food insecurity and education.

This collaboration was the first time we required newsrooms to identify a partner or partners to jointly produce content. We found this process to be fruitful: several teams of newsrooms that had never worked together collaborated on the project and are continuing to work together. For example, The Beacon now has a weekly appearance on KCUR and MinnPost and Sahan Journal jointly hosted an event.

The project was made possible by funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We leveraged that funding to create a much larger project than what we originally envisioned. The Solutions Journalism Network provided funding for education reporting, and additional funding was made available from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Joyce Foundation, which provide annual support for our work in Chicago and the Great Lakes region, respectively.

## Outcomes and Impact

Below are just a few examples of participants' post-project comments:

- Wausau Pilot & Review (criminal justice): “The funding we received made this story series possible, period. This is a story we wanted to tell, but with limited resources carving out the time was impossible.”
- Side Effects Public Media (mental health): (The funding was) “significant in terms of providing us the time and resources to do it right. We were able to hire an Indiana-based videographer to have an accompanying video to bring home the devastation that has been wrought on ordinary families, and to hire a talented Michigan-based photographer to really spend quality time, sometimes for days with affected families.”

- Sahan Journal (Latino workers): “Honestly... I think signing on to this project committed us to invest a lot of reporter and editor time on the kind of in-depth story we don't always prioritize (given the limited size of our staff and all the other demands we have to create daily and weekly news reports. That's a good thing, to be clear). We may have been able to cover this staff expense without the money but we almost certainly wouldn't have done it without the encouragement and deadlines imposed by this INN grant.”
- Detour Detroit (food insecurity): “Though the focus of our stories -- food insecurity, food systems and solutions -- have been an ongoing editorial priority, INN funding allowed us to conceptualize a series that was more comprehensive, ambitious and lasting than pieces we would have done otherwise.

Participating newsrooms reported positive responses from their communities.

- Cicero Independiente noted that a group of community activists were using the stories to create a set of demands for the town of Cicero, Ill., to adopt for future vaccination efforts. In addition, the people and organizations profiled in the stories expressed pride in being included.
- Referring to the Sahan Journal/MinnPost story, “Too much work or not enough: Latinos in Minnesota describe one pandemic but two very different economies,” Abigail Wozniak, a labor economist at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, tweeted: “Is this the best reporting I've read on the complexities of the Covid labor market? It might be.” The story also was widely shared by local unions and Latino labor advocacy groups,
- Bridge Michigan’s lead reporter, Robin Erb, was invited to host a panel of top lawmakers to talk about mental-health reform. The Free Press reported back to Bridge that the Day 2 story was one of its five most popular stories online in July. Erb also appeared on Michigan Radio to talk about the series. Bridge Michigan featured the series at a monthly forum. Three experts, Zakia Alavi, staff psychiatrist at [LifeWays Community Mental Health in Jackson](#), Kevin Fischer, executive director of [National Alliance on Mental Illness, Michigan Chapter](#) and Timothy Michling, a health affairs research associate at the [Citizens Research Council of Michigan](#), discussed how to improve Michigan’s youth mental health treatment system with Erb. More than 100 readers participated.

## Analytics

Sharing on social was particularly strong, as links to the participants’ reporting were posted on pages with more than 1.3 million followers on Facebook and posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with 1.4 million total followers. The republication of stories by partners increased social reach significantly: for example, two stories republished by the Detroit Free Press were posted on Facebook pages with more than 500,000 followers and retweeted by Twitter accounts with nearly 900,000 followers.

We found that 20 outlets republished at least one story from the series, notably the Detroit Free Press and statewide public media outlets in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana. Wisconsin Public Radio followed up with [an interview](#) with two journalists on the project about their findings. The series was featured on national and statewide Patch sites. Meltwater estimates the potential reach of these outlets combined is 39.3 million unique visitors.

Collaboration participants reported receiving more than 32,000 unique page views on their stories.

## Appendix

A sample of some outlets that republished stories:

- [Across America Patch](#)
- [Detroit Free Press](#)
- [Holland Sentinel](#)
- [Illinois Patch](#)
- [Indiana Patch](#)
- [Indiana Public Media](#)
- [Kansas Patch](#)
- [Michigan Patch](#)
- [Michigan Radio](#)
- [Minnesota Patch](#)
- [Minnesota Public Radio](#)
- [Missouri Patch](#)
- [Petoskey News-Review](#)
- [Sentinel-Standard](#)
- [Shawnee Mission Post](#)
- [Urban Milwaukee](#)
- [Wisconsin Patch](#)
- [Wisconsin Public Radio](#)
- [Wisconsin Watch](#)
- [WTMJ](#)

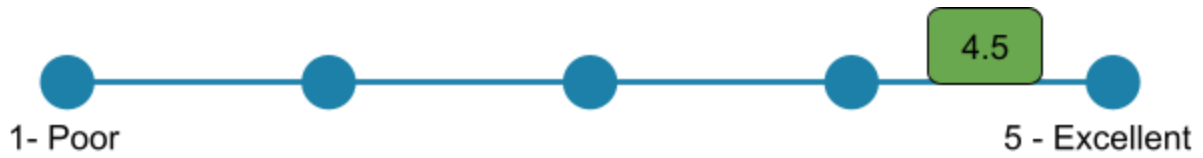
## Collaboration feedback

Below are the average responses from the 15 INN newsrooms asked to rank their experiences on a 5-point scale:

Quality of journalism overall



Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom



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



Ability to get questions answered by the project manager



Pickup by other news organizations



Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future



Likelihood that you would work with your partner organization(s) in the future

