



Keeping Rural on the Record

www.ruralnewsfund.org/apply

Rural News Fund Open Call – Capital & Capacity Support for Rural Journalism in Central Appalachia

Introduction

Local news and journalism are changing. We've felt this shift for some time, as the way people seek and receive reliable news has become less centralized, and existing revenue models have become much less effective in sustaining the work. These changes, paired with major funding shake-ups at the federal level highlight a sector that has been left with little choice but to accelerate its pace of evolution.

In Central Appalachia, we are no strangers to change, or overcoming challenges, and we understand rural small business ingenuity. Timely access to community information has never been more critical, but, according to insights revealed in our recently released [*The State of the News Business in Central Appalachia*](#), there are warning signs that the number of news deserts in our region will continue to grow. What is more, only 1% of all philanthropic funding for news in the U.S. went to rural counties from 2019 to 2024. In Appalachia, this is compounded by the knowledge that 26% of our counties hold less than \$1 per person in local philanthropic assets.

To combat these gaps, we formed [The Rural News](#) Fund in 2024. This fund, from which all money will remain in Central Appalachia, exists to strengthen the civic infrastructure of Central Appalachia by investing in locally-based journalism and information systems. Access to local news and reporting is an essential ingredient in building more connected, informed, and equitable communities across the region.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



APPALACHIA
FUNDERS NETWORK



The Rural News Fund is led by the [Appalachia Funders Network](#) and managed by [Invest Appalachia](#), with Open Call Cohort and Navigator management provided by [Media Growth Partners](#).



The Invitation

The Press Forward Central Appalachia invites eligible news media organizations from across the region to participate in the first **Rural News Fund open call**, which will provide two years of grant funding and business development support. Informed by previous listening sessions and designed with your input, the Rural News Fund aims to meet the specific needs of news providers in our region—especially around capacity, infrastructure, and innovative capital for business sustainability.

Open Call Objective

This open call aims to identify a diverse group of local news organization partners with investible plans for expansion of locally-based journalism into rural at-risk and news desert counties in Central Appalachia. Qualified respondents to this questionnaire will be invited to submit proposals for funding and business development support to add at least one locally-based journalist to an eligible county.

Award Details

- Five proposals will be selected to receive business development and operating grants of \$50,000 per year for two years (\$100,000 total grant).
- Awardees will be assigned a “Navigator”, or professional business development coach, for one-on-one assistance in capital planning for personnel, training, and technology acquisition, as well as advice on business operations. Navigators will help awardees connect to free and business expertise providers, like those from Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) offices, as well as regional and national Journalism Support Organizations (JSOs).
- Awardees will form a five-member peer support cohort to explore best practices, networking, cost-sharing, and revenue-generating opportunities across the five expansion projects.
- All applicants will be added to communications and given opportunities to explore small business “repayable capital products” (financing like loans or repayable grants, which must be paid back). The cohort members (as well as other publications in region) will be provided opportunities to access repayable products through RNF with support and guidance from Invest Appalachia.



Eligibility Requirements

1. For-profit, nonprofit or public media incorporated news businesses who have been publishing for at least one year are eligible to apply.
 2. Organizations in different stages (including start-ups, legacy outlets, and in between), and serving diverse and underrepresented audiences are all encouraged to apply.
 3. Applicants must identify coverage in a rural market in this region which also falls into at least one of these categories:
 - A Medill “at risk” or news desert county from the [2024 State of Local News](#) map
 - A county with less than 1 journalist equivalent in the [Local Journalism Index](#) map
 - A county with less than \$1 per capita of local philanthropic assets on the [State of Funding in Appalachia](#) map
 4. Applicants must already have at least two full-time journalist employees living within the ARC definition of Central, North Central, and South Central Appalachia. This includes the rural mountain counties of Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. To see if your current and target expansion county fits that criteria, please click [HERE](#).
 5. Multiple news organizations are welcome to state their intent to apply jointly to address the same expansion market, but they would be considered one project applicant and eligible for one \$100,000 grant award, split over two years.
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Timeline and Process

1. The first step in this open call is to complete [this](#) questionnaire, which *serves as and replaces* a traditional Letter of Interest, **by September 12**.
 - Note: Questionnaire responses will remain **confidential** and will be reviewed only by the Rural News Fund Coordinating Committee.
 - This is *just the beginning*—we envision this as the first of many rounds of funding. Your insights will help shape what’s next.
2. Qualified news organizations will receive an invitation **by September 19** to submit a full proposal.
3. Applications and documentation for the full proposal must be submitted **by October 17**.
4. Awardees will be announced **by October 31, 2025**



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