

Spotlight PA

SPRING 2026
CASE STUDY



FROM IDEA TO IMPACT: THE STORY OF SPOTLIGHT PA



Cover: Spotlight PA staff. Photo by Dani Fresh.



SPOTLIGHT PA
WE COVER PENNSYLVANIA LIKE NO ONE ELSE

A note from The Lenfest Institute

Since our founding in 2016, The Lenfest Institute has brought together capital, philanthropy, and business expertise to advance local news.

Nothing epitomizes this commitment more than Spotlight PA. After years of declining statehouse coverage in Harrisburg, the Institute recognized a need for increased coverage of the policies that affect all Pennsylvanians.

Together with partners across Pennsylvania, the Institute raised \$2 million to launch the nonprofit news site in 2019.

This case study details the story behind the development, launch, and growth of Spotlight PA. Starting with just a handful of reporters and media partners, Spotlight PA now employs more than 30 journalists, fundraisers, and technologists, and it distributes its coverage, free of charge, to more than 125 other news organizations for republication.

While Spotlight PA's distinctive brand of watchdog reporting has generated 35 policy changes, 14 new bills, and eight legal victories, this report will focus on the behind-the-scenes strategies that have empowered its journalists to make such an impact.

We hope this provides insights and a roadmap for other leaders looking to sustain essential statewide journalism in their communities. Our team at The Lenfest Institute stands ready to answer any questions and offer support in any way we can. Email us at info@lenfestinstitute.org

Best,

Jim Friedlich
Executive Director & CEO
The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

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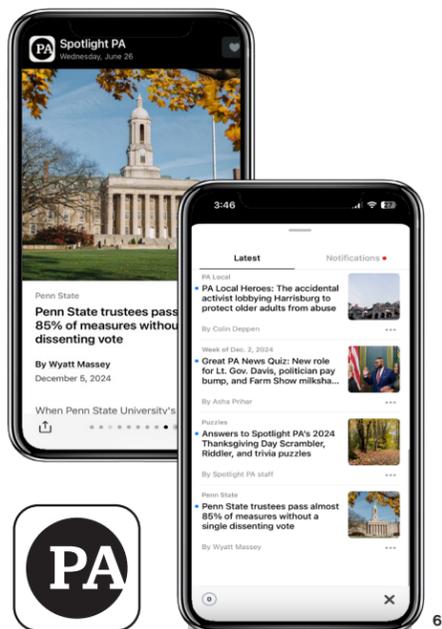
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The Mission
of Spotlight PA is to hold powerful public and private forces — especially governments, elected officials, businesses, and special interests — to account through urgent and compelling investigative and public-service journalism that drives change and strengthens our democracy, the state, and all who live here.

1. Former Washington Post editor Marty Baron in conversation with Spotlight PA CEO Christopher Baxter at a donor event in 2024. Photo by Alan Sylvestre.
2. A Spotlight PA State College Quiz Bash fundraiser. Photos by Georgianna Sutherland.
3. Capitol reporter Stephen Caruso talks to voters on Election Day 2022. Photo by Amanda Berg.
4. Spotlight PA Democracy Editor Elizabeth Estrada. Photo by Dani Fresh.
5. Spotlight PA staff. Photo by Dani Fresh.
6. Based on reader feedback, Spotlight PA launched a new mobile app. The app offers readers a convenient way to keep up with Spotlight PA's reporting and streamlines the reader experience by sharing Spotlight PA's latest stories in a visual, easy-to-read format.
7. Spotlight PA Lead Editor, News Products Colin Deppen at the State Capitol in Harrisburg.
8. Spotlight PA State College reporters Marley Parish and Wyatt Massey at Quiz Bash 2024. Photo by Georgianna Sutherland.



From Idea *to* Impact:

The Story of

Spotlight PA



By Caroline Porter

What happens when a prominent swing state loses the majority of its statehouse reporters at a time of growing state-level power? We know that story well. What we don't know as well is how and what happens when a new journalism outfit sprouts up and thrives in the midst of unfavorable economic conditions, fickle consumer behavior, and political tension.

This is the story of Spotlight PA, a statewide news organization launched in 2019, in the middle of the first Trump presidency and on the eve of a pandemic. It has grown from a staff of 10 to a staff of 33 people, all focused on the long-term success of an investigative, statewide news venture. The nonprofit news organization distributes coverage free-of-charge to more than 125 news organizations across Pennsylvania, and in addition to its headquarters in the state capital of Harrisburg, operates two community newsrooms in State College and Berks County.

A close look at the statewide news organization that Spotlight PA has created reveals essential truths about what it means to build and operate journalism organizations today, and it offers core building blocks for others to consider as they launch new journalism enterprises across the country.

< Reporter Ed Mahon, reporter/editor Katie Meyer, and reporter Angela Couloumbis at the Pennsylvania state Capitol. Photo by Amanda Mustard.

Spotlight PA's Development as a Study in Collaboration

From its earliest origins to its current status today, Spotlight PA has enjoyed a persistent throughline: a spirit of collaboration. This ethos has unlocked fundraising dollars, enabled editorial partnerships, and scaled the organization's impact. It has brought together unlikely bedfellows, strengthened the organization's *raison d'être*, enhanced its bottom line, and served the people of Pennsylvania.

And yet, collaboration can be a broad term, encompassing a variety of partnerships and complexities. When we examine the history of Spotlight PA, we see the full use of collaboration in its many forms. This report reviews these types of collaborations and explains their role in Spotlight PA's success through four distinct phases of its formation, growth, and evolution.



The Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg. Photo by Amanda Berg.

Executive Summary

This case study's task is two-fold: to provide an overview of Spotlight PA's origin, and to pinpoint key lessons of its development to date. Here are insights from interviews with 18 people involved in the site's growth and launch, a review of key documents, and an assessment of Spotlight PA's coverage over the years:

- Shifting forms of collaboration provided the space and support for Spotlight PA to evolve into an independent and sustainable news organization. Early fundraising played an essential role in the final deliberations of how the project would look. It also established discipline and clarity about the mission and messaging of Spotlight PA, a throughline in its connection with audiences, partners, and funders.
- Spotlight PA's statewide appeal and mission enhanced its value proposition and further propelled the product-market fit with funders and audience members. By launching with high-impact investigative stories, Spotlight PA set the tone and pace for its work with its own staff, its audience, and its funders.
- Following the initial launch of Spotlight PA, the focus pivoted to operations and setting up the organization for success, bringing reporters from the founding newsrooms together into one shared organization.
- By harnessing the power of collaboration while operating as a single entity, Spotlight PA reduced its organizational complexity and made room for a single-minded goal: a statewide focus that proved critical to its sustainability.
- As Spotlight PA grew its partnerships and reach, there was a growing need for discipline and clarity around the structure and the mission. While it continued to rely on the support and relationships with its first collaborators, Spotlight PA focused on additional partnerships and new community newsrooms, expanding and growing its own singular entity's strength and reach. ■

2010-2018
PHASE

1

Beta-testing
collaboration

Prior to the launch of Spotlight PA in 2019, local news organizations across Pennsylvania experimented with ways to save money and to strengthen reporting by working together.

Business and journalism concerns lead to early partnerships

Business concerns motivated early partnerships between The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, paving the way for a move toward collaboration and away from competition. In addition to content sharing, the two metro newspapers participated in legal coalitions to pay for court records for the high-profile trials of Bill Cosby and Jerry Sandusky in the 2010s. "I was under the kind of extreme budget pressures that all of us were under in that period ... I was looking for any way to find even five cents of savings," said David Shribman, who served as executive editor at the Post-Gazette at the time and was interested in combining statehouse bureaus. "That, in a way, is the origin of all of this."

Mirroring financial concerns, there was a statewide acknowledgment of the loss of watchdog reporting among the statehouse reporting corps that inculcated an openness toward more editorial collaboration. When Angela Coulombis, now an investigative journalist with Spotlight PA, first came to The Inquirer's Harrisburg bureau in late 2005, she was one of three reporters covering Harrisburg for The Inquirer. By 2014, she was the only reporter on the beat for The Inquirer.

"Here you have one person now in The Inquirer's bureau trying to cover this massive bureaucracy at the state level," said Coulombis, who cited burnout and bandwidth issues.

Stan Wischnowski, the executive editor of The Inquirer from 2012 to 2020, visited the pressroom in Harrisburg at one point and said,

Funders across the state shared a collaborative spirit around messaging, emphasizing journalism's value to democracy and the right of residents to access information.

"I remember looking at these photo galleries, year-by-year pictures of the correspondents, from across the state ... there were large numbers of people in the photos in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and you work your way around the room, and when you get to the 2000s, it's like, you can see this stark sort of, wow, there's not many people here."

New conversations about statehouse collaboration generate fundraising interest

These shared realities set the stage for new conversations among three legacy newspapers in the state: The Inquirer, the Post-Gazette, and Lancaster County's LNP Media Group.

Around this time, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the nonprofit, non-controlling owner of The Inquirer and founded through a donation from H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest in 2016, began brainstorming ways to improve journalism in Pennsylvania and issued a call for proposals. The editors at The Inquirer tossed around an idea of a statewide investigative newsroom, focused on state government.

The idea, dubbed at the time the Keystone Accountability Project, came from Jim Neff, an editor at The Inquirer who had previously pitched a similar concept at The Seattle Times. After sharing the initial idea with Jim Friedlich, The Lenfest Institute's executive director and CEO, the team refined it and added more clarity about how the organization would function among the newsrooms.

Conceived as a shared bureau across newsrooms, the Keystone Accountability Project eventually became what we know as Spotlight PA today.

The early discussions among The Inquirer, Post-Gazette, and LNP generated credibility for the effort among local news leaders, and

most notably, fundraising momentum. Temple University was also engaged in the early conversations. By launching fundraising efforts while the project was still in early development, the Institute raised money before there was even consensus on a name for the project, and notably provided a three-year runway.

"The very first gift that came in for Spotlight, I remember it vividly," said Annie McCain Madonia, The Lenfest Institute's executive vice president and a Spotlight PA Board member. "It was from a family here in Philadelphia, and it was a three-year grant, six figures, when Spotlight was just an idea on a piece of paper ... really all you need is a strong, cogent plan and one generous donor who believes in the vision to get you started."

News leaders in the state collaborate on fundraising

During this time, Harrisburg-based public media station WITF was in the midst of launching a daily outlet, PA Post, to cover statehouse issues, and, given the similarities between the Institute and WITF projects, the potential downsides to parallel and competitive fundraising efforts were evident.

Feather Houstoun, the senior advisor for public media and journalism at Wyncote Foundation, said she encouraged Spotlight PA and WITF to pursue a joint fundraising plan as they developed their approach to potential funders.

The two organizations successfully approached funders together about the need for watchdog reporting. Many were intrigued by a shared fundraising effort between WITF and The Lenfest Institute, which enabled the organizations to reach new partners through each other's networks.

KEYSTONEWATCH

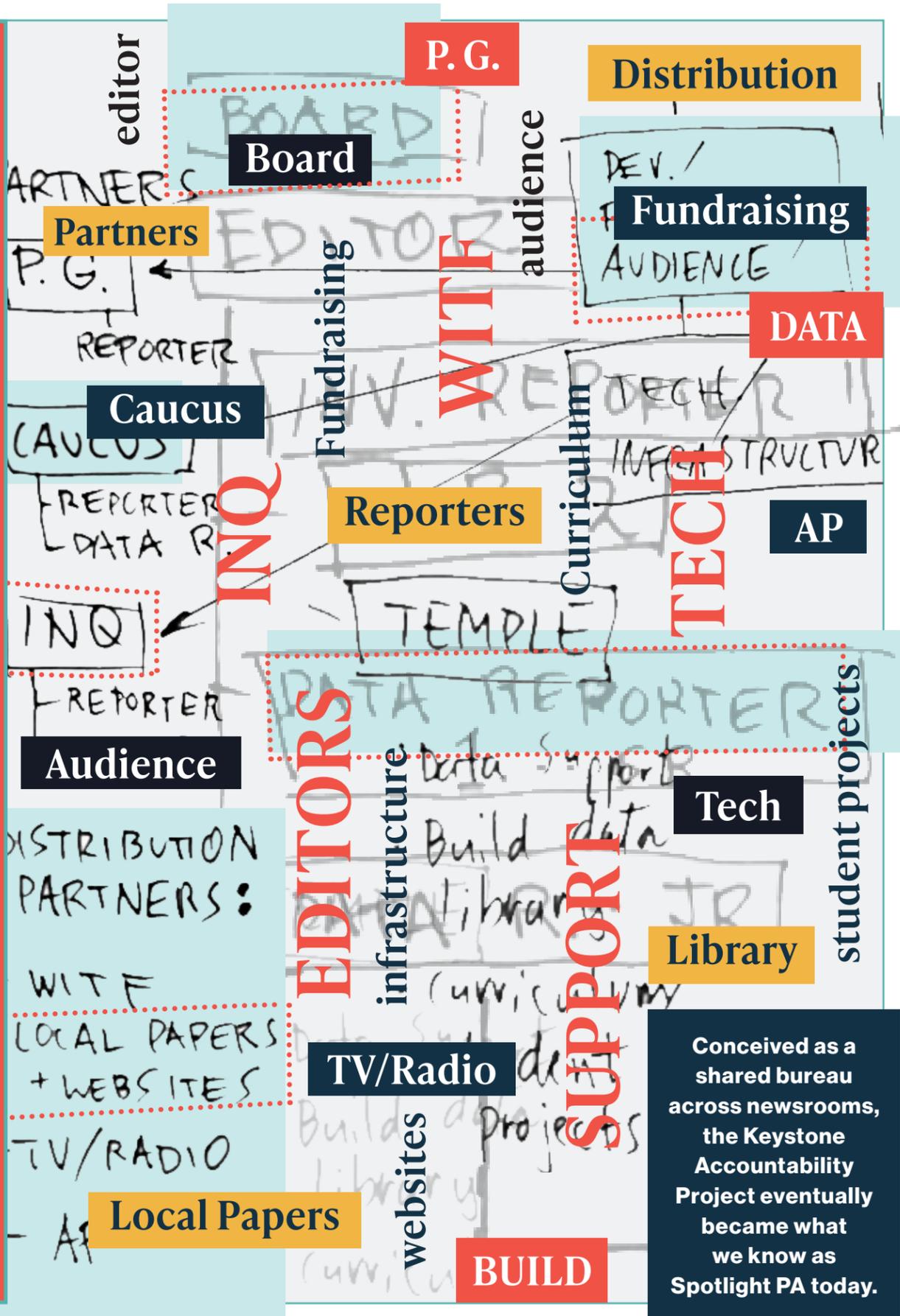


Illustration musing off Jim Neff's original hand-written organizational flow chart for the Keystone Accountability Project. By Piper Lyman.

PHASE 1 CONTINUED

Wyncote Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, and the Henry L. Hillman Foundation were strong supporters from the beginning.

"[Kathleen Pavelko, president and CEO of WITF,] was outstanding and a leader in this collaborative effort," said McCain Madonia. "I really give hats off to her because we didn't know any of the donors in the western part of the state the way she did. She was an excellent partner. And it worked really well." McCain Madonia stressed the importance of their regular meeting cadence to keep the collaborative fundraising moving forward. Pavelko and McCain Madonia worked together, along with their teams, to identify prospects, compile a list of outreach targets, and then divide the work.

"It felt like we were in it together, and we were very transparent with the funders about where the money was going and how and what we were going to work on together," McCain Madonia said.

As plans developed, there were differing ideas about how to set up the organization's structure and editorial collaboration. Competing visions of Spotlight PA led to some tensions among partners during its genesis.

"One of the obstacles was ... that a salad bowl of different ownership structures required a lot more deep thought about 'is this the right thing to do?'" said Wischnowski.

When it came time to launch, The Philadelphia Inquirer, with funding support from The Lenfest Institute, provided the hiring apparatus and early setup for the collaboration, soon to be named Spotlight PA.

Christopher Baxter was hired in March 2019 as the inaugural editor, reporting into The Philadelphia Inquirer's leadership.

Around this time, LNP dropped out of the collaboration. Later, after launch, the Post-Gazette also stopped participating.

"The structure fundamentally changed," said

was kind of okay ... but it got to be like, oh gosh, can we justify this? Especially as down the road, a lot of other news sites got on board and could use all of the content."

Baxter's vision ultimately helped steer the organization's direction and development. "The original concept was pretty tightly focused on coverage of Harrisburg and state government," said David Boardman, board chair of Spotlight PA, founding chair and board member of The Lenfest Institute, interim provost of Temple University, and dean of the Klein College of Media and Communication at Temple University. "Chris pretty quickly took that to a much broader examination of statewide issues."

Christopher Baxter: Leadership with vision and detail

Baxter, who was well-versed in the state's characteristics from a stint working in Allentown, came to Spotlight from Advance Local in New Jersey, a privately held company that made an aggressive pivot to digital journalism in the early 2010s. As a Knight-Wallace fellow at the University of Michigan in 2015-2016, he workshopped ideas that became Spotlight PA's backbone: "I had essentially studied this concept, which is how to support and promote enterprise and investigative work in a newsroom shifting to be digital-first, because what I had experienced was that work really got eaten alive by that new business model," he said.

From the beginning, Baxter had a bigger vision beyond the initial conception of Spotlight PA as a joint reporting operation among other newsrooms. "He's got vision, and he actually knows how to execute it," said Posner Foundation Executive Director Anne Marie Toccket. "He can think and do, and he is really singular for me in this work in terms of his ability to understand the gravity of the problem — not be paralyzed by it, not be daunted by it — see the body of work available in Pennsylvania, and then go execute it. It's incredible." ■

Early fundraising played an essential role in the final deliberations of how the project would look. It also established discipline and clarity about the mission and messaging of Spotlight PA, a throughline in its connection with funders, partners, and audiences.

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Evolving conceptions of the statehouse reporting partnership

As the three news organizations began conversations about collaboration in earnest, Robert Krasne, who oversaw LNP Newspaper and Lancaster Online in Lancaster, Penn. at the time, offered to share its statehouse news brand, The Caucus, which launched in late 2016 with its first print publication.

Already, through a joint reporting arrangement, the Caucus' reporters and The Inquirer's reporter, Couloumbis, had worked together to identify stories and share resources. "I had worked with the Caucus on several stories prior to 2019 ... it was on very specific stories that were really hard to get and needed more manpower ... and it didn't really have an [official] editing structure," said Couloumbis.

Krasne. "Originally, the three founding members were each going to donate part, and it was going to be much leaner. It may have been its own nonprofit, but it was going to be subsidized by the three news organizations with philanthropic support to expand it. But at its core, it was going to have the benefits of the editorial power of the three news organizations."

PennLive, an Advance Local newspaper and website based in Harrisburg, subsequently joined the partnership, contributed financially, and contributed a reporter. Cate Barron, who ran PennLive at the launch of Spotlight PA and lobbied to be an early collaborator, described joining Spotlight PA as a "mixed experience." Barron said that when she learned that Wischnowski was involved, she wanted her newsroom to participate, describing his participation as a catalyst for her own.

"That was a lot more difficult than I thought it was going to be," said Barron, who is now retired. "Having a reporter with two bosses ... We paid for the salary, but they reported to Chris and the other editors at Spotlight, and we didn't have much control over that, which

“(Baxter) has vision, and he actually knows how to execute it. He can think and do, and he is really singular for me in this work in terms of his ability to understand the gravity of the problem ... It’s incredible”

Anne Marie Toccket

2019 PHASE 2

Nesting collaboration by launching Spotlight PA within pre-existing institutions

Once there was a formal understanding and agreement, the foundation had been set, and the initial hire made with Christopher Baxter, Spotlight PA was off and running by mid-2019. A memorandum of understanding signed by participating newsrooms outlined the process for editorial oversight, defined the legal apparatus, and scoped the budget.

Relying on institutional support in the early days

Following the initial launch of Spotlight PA, the focus pivoted to operations and setting up the organization for success, which meant finding a way to bring journalists from the three founding newsrooms together into one shared unit.

In addition to Baxter, Joanna Bernstein joined in July 2019 as a development director. Spotlight PA launched in September 2019 with 10 positions: Baxter, Bernstein, Carlana Johnson as tech director, and seven reporting positions, three of which were funded by the member news organizations. Spotlight PA employees' salaries and benefits were run through The Inquirer, with The Lenfest Institute as the parent organization underpinning the structure. This allowed Spotlight PA to focus on editorial and development functions, with less emphasis on the operations setup.

The Institute proved to be a backbone and brain trust: providing software licenses, refining pitches, and supporting development

operations. With WITF's fundraising partnership, the two created a powerful fundraising machine for Spotlight PA, raising roughly \$2 million as starting capital to spend over three years from 2019-2021. In the first year, the budget was about \$750,000. The Institute has since granted Spotlight PA \$500,000 per year since that initial \$2 million investment, and it now represents one-tenth of the Spotlight PA budget.

This type of steady, recurrent support was essential, and many early supporters, such as Wyncote Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, and the Henry L. Hillman Foundation, maintained or increased their support for Spotlight PA as the organization grew.

"Having these foundations from coast to coast, just emerge all at once — it was kind of like lightning in a bottle. I mean, it was just stunning," said Wischnowski.

The Lenfest Institute: consistent champion of Spotlight PA

Spotlight PA's early and consistent champions gave it a remarkable boost financially, strategically, and operationally.

“Lenfest support has been so robust, in every way, financially and also providing us with so much leadership and development expertise at the beginning ... Jim has been a really important thought partner for Chris and has opened doors for us with funders.”

Joanna Zuckerman Bernstein

By embedding within The Lenfest Institute in its early years, Spotlight PA gained funding, office space, job training, and moral support. The Institute shared lessons from its participation and experiments around the country, helping to inform and shape the action on the ground in Pennsylvania.

Major funders joined in the beginning, giving Spotlight PA a head start and generating trust with donors and among some partners. As McCain Madonia put it, "People give to people. So when you have people standing up and saying, 'This is a good institution, or this is a good project, or I trust them,' or introduce you, that helps to support your appeal."

"It wasn't created as this outside entity," said Rebecca Forman, now the chief development officer of Report Local and previous head of development and donor relations at The Lenfest Institute. "It was created of these entities that already existed. So we had natural, built-in relationships with funders, with community members who cared about Lenfest or cared about the Post-Gazette, or cared about The Inquirer. There was already this natural affinity. When we were going to donors, we weren't starting from ground zero... They were supporting a group, a project that was embedded in places they already trusted."

Multi-year commitments provided a runway to further build out the business plan, raise additional capital, and, within the first few years, establish a proof of concept to support fundraising.

Shribman, who knew Friedlich from their college days, said that Friedlich played a special role in creating the momentum for Spotlight PA. "His presence in all of this somehow was a lubricant ... he's aggressively innovative, he's imaginative, and he has money. That's a pretty great combination, but he's also very, very easy to work with, and it was encouraging from the start," said Shribman.

Building on fundraising expertise and strategy

Spotlight PA's experience indicates how the fundraising apparatus needs to be well-defined and well-resourced.

"You need to have at least one, if not two, people who are good externally in relationship building and sort of sales," said McCain Madonia, who oversaw the fundraising efforts for The Lenfest Institute and Spotlight PA. "One should be a professional staff person who is going to do the follow-up, and the others can be volunteers, board members, friends of the institution. And this is just to really get started."

To that point, development operations on salary and with good retention were key. Rebecca

Pavelko, the former president and CEO of WITF. "So it was important to move beyond the handful of already established news funders ... that too is critical to the long-term effectiveness and survival of Spotlight PA." At the time Spotlight PA was establishing itself was also the time that entities not previously supporting news became aware of the loss of reporting in Pennsylvania, she said. "It was a timing thing."

Plus, the government beat helped the fundraising pitch writ large with audiences:

Having well-organized systems paved the way for easier communications, which – do not have to be major galas but can be very effective with simple emails.

Forman, now the chief development officer of Report Local (home of Report for America and Report for the World), worked at The Lenfest Institute for 6.5 years and led day-to-day development. She dedicated about 25 percent of her time to fundraising for Spotlight PA.

"When it was started, it was part of our work at Lenfest and a part of the Inquirer's work," said Forman. "And so as a fundraising team, we were deeply connected to the day-to-day there, and the fundraising and all sorts of operations ... It wasn't this other thing for us, it was our work."

One of Spotlight PA Deputy Director Joanna Bernstein's first jobs was to build an individual, small-dollar giving program. "That was core to the launch of Spotlight," said Forman.

Forman provided extensive hands-on support to Bernstein, who then leveraged the Institute's development team's expertise on behalf of Spotlight PA.

"What made us different, too, is that Rebecca really trained me," she said. "Rebecca comes from a strict nonprofit fundraising background, and she trained me in how to be a nonprofit fundraiser. ... Rebecca and I spoke every day for a very long time."

Spotlight PA also expanded its circle outside of traditional news supporters. "Spotlight's been very successful in identifying other funders, well-endowed individuals, for example, and family foundations that hadn't previously invested in news," said Kathleen

"A lot of our donors were in their 60s or 70s. They were Inquirer readers at a time when there was a lot of Harrisburg news. They had seen the decline. They knew what they were missing," said Forman.

Matches have proven to be a lucrative fundraising tool. The Institute leveraged a challenge match from its founder, H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest, which spurred both support and actual dollars, in part by showing that the Institute had skin in the game. McCain Madonia described this as appealing to funders because it showed that "we weren't just raising money from [funders], that we were in it with them."

Another fundraising vehicle was the 'friendraiser.' Because Spotlight PA did not have a major presence among western Pennsylvania donors, the Posner Foundation hosted a "friendraiser," a ticketed dinner to help raise Spotlight PA's profile.

"It's not about raising money that night," said Posner Foundation Executive Director Anne Marie Toccket. "We're going to underwrite the event, and it's about getting people in the room who have the capacity to give and who see the value in the work and who are invested in fields of democracy or civic engagement or government or civil liberties."

Finally, systems matter. The Institute initially tracked the earliest gifts for Spotlight PA on an Excel spreadsheet before eventually upgrading to Salesforce. "We knew that

we needed a CRM (customer-relationship management) tool," said McCain Madonia. "You have to think about the front of the house and the back of the house. A waiter is only going to get a really good tip if the kitchen delivers the food on time."

Having well-organized systems paved the way for easier communications, which, according to Forman, do not have to be major galas but can be very effective with simple emails.

"We were really mindful about donor stewardship," said Forman. "We were really on top of those communications ... It's thinking about the needs and the engagement of your donors at all levels."

TIP In addition to steady communication, funders also appreciate advance warning about upcoming funding requests. By forecasting future aims, there's time to workshop appeals with donors directly and build relationships.

"We're hearing about ideas for a year, and then he comes with it, and it's baked, and it's interesting and ready to go, and we're comfortable with it because we've been thinking about it and hearing about it and understanding how it fits with their strategy," said Toccket.

This also requires patience. "You have to build the relationships, and you have to build the trust and foundations," said McCain Madonia.

TIP The Institute built out a plan for its first few steps and shopped that around with funders as a draft, but didn't go overboard with the planning. "I find that people in this industry say to me, 'Well, I don't know where we're going to be in five years because all of this changes so much.' And I'm like, you don't need to know. It can change, but you need to have a map. You need a financial framework and a map of what you think it is right now. Donors are flexible; donors understand. "You just need to keep them informed." said McCain Madonia.

TIP That startup leaders don't have to have it all figured out, also aligns with one of McCain Madonia's other development tips: "The best way to ask for money is to ask for advice."

Leveraging the statewide mission

Spotlight PA's statewide appeal and statewide mission enhanced its value proposition and further propelled the product-market fit with funders and audience members.

From the beginning, Baxter's vision was a big one. "I saw a statewide news organization, statewide potential, massive potential audience, massive potential donor base," he said.

From his time in Allentown, Baxter was familiar with other parts of the state and saw how underserved people were in these communities. "I think The Inquirer's vision was largely informed by what they saw in Philadelphia, and I was like, the real game here is everywhere else," he said.

The statewide focus allows Spotlight PA to go where the coverage gaps are and to exercise judicious use of resources for what's newsworthy, taking a broad view of the state. From the beginning, all of Spotlight PA's coverage was made available to partner news organizations across Pennsylvania to republish at no cost.

The statewide emphasis also helped pave the path for the Institute's fundraising efforts.

"It was a great sell, especially outside of Philadelphia to funders across the state because their dollars were being leveraged," said Forman. "Lenfest and these other news organizations sort of said, 'We all need better Harrisburg coverage, but we cannot fund [a] huge Harrisburg corps on our own.'"

It also helped funders. "The work of Spotlight PA allows us to do statewide work without being statewide funders or without having an explicit statewide strategy, agenda or policy that we're driving at," said Toccket.

Fine-tuning the org chart and technology

Smart hiring was key — for both editorial and business functions — at this time in the organization's development.

"Number one, it's like we need talented reporters, right?" said Baxter. "We need more and better journalism, and that begins with journalists. Nothing I do as CEO, nothing our development team does, nothing our audience team does, none of it matters if we don't have the best reporters on the ground."

Baxter said he wanted to find editorial talent outside of Pennsylvania. "We made a point in that early hiring to not just go and pick off the best reporters from the Pennsylvania media outlets,"

he said. "I didn't want to just move pieces. I wanted to bring more talent to the state."

This paid off when courting funders. A trustee of the Posner Foundation of Pittsburgh saw the coverage and suggested that Toccket look into it. "They were doing really good, substantive coverage, probably the best coverage in the state about redistricting work, and they caught [the trustee's] eye, and that's how we were introduced to their journalism," said Toccket.

The Posner Foundation provided an initial \$100,000 grant in 2021, as part of the foundation's first round of journalism grants. Now in its fourth year of funding support, the foundation sees Spotlight PA as the strongest component of its media portfolio. Posner expanded to a three-year, \$1 million pledge with additional support for specific requests, and hosted a fundraiser for Spotlight PA — a first for the foundation.

The statewide focus allows Spotlight to go where the coverage gaps are and to exercise judicious use of resources for what's newsworthy, taking a broad view of the state.

Bernstein and Baxter established the individual giving program, building on the Institute's runway of foundation and major donor support for the project. The choice to hire Johnson as a full-time technology lead enabled Spotlight PA's coverage to be easily shared among partners, paving the path for growing its network.

Jessica McAllister, who oversees a partnership as executive editor of the Centre Daily Times, said the user experience of Spotlight PA's story portal — everything from buttons for copying text to embed codes — allows for a speedy integration into her own site. "It's much easier to do than the average wire story or other kind of partnership story."

Boardman put it this way: "There are many reasons Spotlight PA is successful and one of those is the very adept use of technology ... I think it is the marriage of great fundamental values [in journalism] and the best use of modern tools."

Cultivating a team environment among the organizational players

Each of the founding partners — The Inquirer, Post-Gazette, and PennLive — made a financial commitment and provided a reporter to Spotlight PA. Baxter moved the reporters out of their offices in the statehouse and into a new office near the capitol.

"I don't think Chris liked the idea of a divided newsroom, and it seemed to me that he felt it was very important that we all identified as [Spotlight reporters] ... I made that transition sometime in my own head from being an Inquirer reporter to being a Spotlight reporter probably in late 2020," said Coulombis, who was approached to join the Spotlight PA team from the Inquirer's team.

"It's really hard, you know, if you've spent your career at a very specific news organization to quickly pivot. And that's what was really asked of us — to quickly pivot to being part of a new news organization with new bosses," she said. "The Inquirer launched my career, and I loved working there. But doing investigative reporting full-time is a reporter's dream."

Spotlight PA worked on reporting stories before it launched its website, including a state police investigation that put it on the map and generated instant interest. The 2019 report revealed that the Pennsylvania State Police was not collecting

racial data during traffic stops, deterring evaluation for any potential racial profiling. After the story ran, the police reinstated the practice of collecting racial data.

By launching with high-impact investigative stories, Spotlight PA set the tone and pace for its work, with its own staff, its audience, and its funders.

Covid: Stepping up to cover a crisis

The role of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spotlight PA's evolution points to the centrality of timing, something that cannot be planned but can be catalyzed with the right responses. When the pandemic occurred early in the genesis of Spotlight PA, Baxter pivoted the newsroom quickly. He reached out to partner organizations and asked if they could collaborate more strategically on story assignments and reporters' bandwidth.

"We essentially added three more people right away in COVID ... [we said at the time] 'there's so much to cover, we don't want to duplicate anything,'" he said.

Donor pitches also were strengthened due to the need for more journalistic oversight during this time. "Spotlight had been reporting for almost a year when the pandemic happened," said Forman. "Suddenly what was happening in our state governments across the country felt so much more important to our day-to-day lives than we realized it was before." ■

2020-2022 PHASE 3

Honing collaborations across the state with newsroom partners

By harnessing the power of collaboration, but operating as a single entity, Spotlight PA reduced its organizational complexity and made room for a single-minded goal: The statewide focus that proved critical for its sustainability.

Sowing new collaborations with newsroom partners

Spotlight PA established a network that enabled the organization to work with a long list of players, generating nearly instant credibility and partners across the state. There are now more than 125 newsroom partners, reaching the majority of counties in the state, and the distribution system has led to more than 3,000 reader tips and more

than 1,400 right-to-know requests. Spotlight PA stories have been republished thousands of times. These newsroom partnerships developed into a savvy distribution network that continues to serve as a business solution for marketing and brand awareness today.

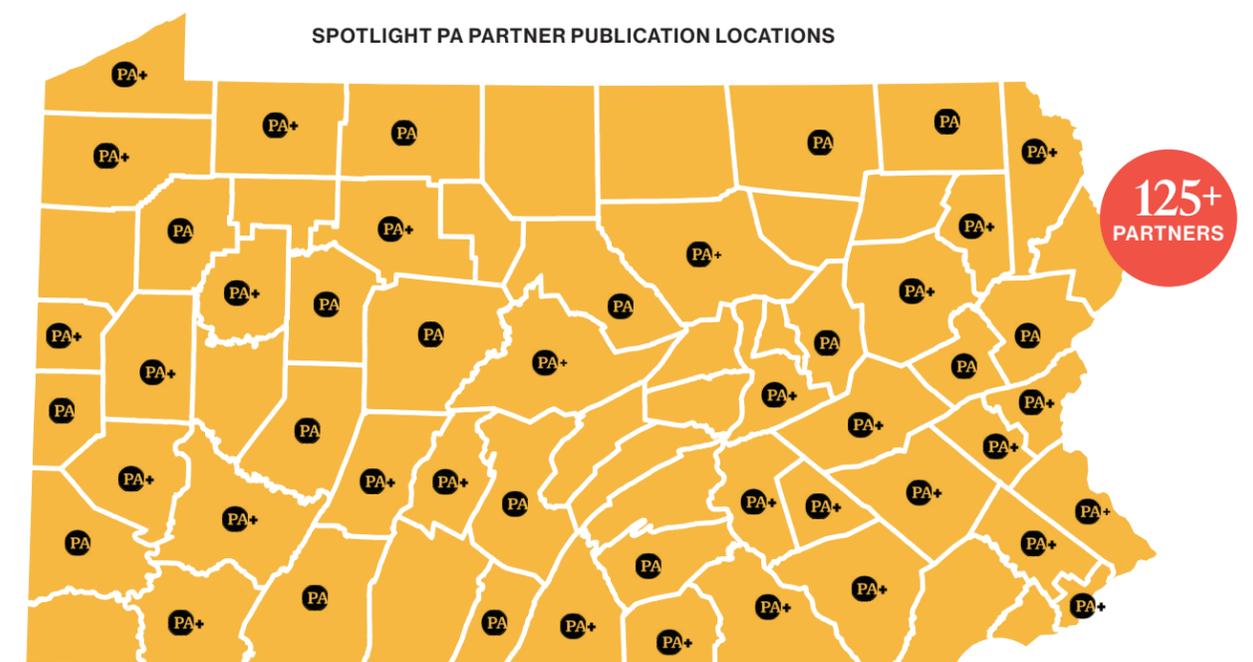
Spotlight PA also got the word out about its no-cost content to news organizations through networking, including with members of the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association.

"Chris came in and spoke to the two statewide journalism organizations, and I think that did a lot to reassure people that this was a great thing; this kind of stuff happens all the time now, but back then it was very, very new," said Barron.

Spotlight PA partners are able to run its coverage free-of-charge. Every partner is required to run promotional campaigns for Spotlight PA in exchange for the reporting, which means additional reach, revenue, and free advertising. The promotional campaigns take the shape of editorial columns, often written by Baxter, who uses the space to explain Spotlight PA's work and to ask for donations. For the TV stations, they are required to run TV ads, too. It also serves as a credibility boost for Spotlight PA when audiences hear other news organizations promote it.

"From day one it was about 'how do we reach as many people across the state as possible?' [and] so partners like republishing partnerships with newsrooms was foundational," said Forman.

Spotlight PA, the largest statewide newsroom in Pennsylvania, has assembled the largest distribution network of its kind in the U.S.



These promotional campaigns boosted individual giving. “As our partner network grew, people saw our articles in their local paper and then would see the call for donations or the call to join our newsletter list, and that was a really big and crucial ingredient to our membership success, growing our top of the funnel and therefore donations,” Bernstein, now Spotlight PA’s deputy director, said.

These media partnerships benefited from trust among partners, and as Phil Dubrow, the VP/GM of Altoona’s WTAJ-TV, put it, “Each party can’t be greedy ... I think that’s the most important

From Day one it was about ‘how do we reach as many people across the state as possible’

thing.” More recently, Dubrow orchestrated a TV partnership with Spotlight PA, which led to the hiring of a Spotlight PA investigative TV reporter. Dubrow added that meeting expectations and not overpromising were essential.

Making collaboration even closer with a merger

In 2020, WITF’s PA Post became part of Spotlight PA.

PA Post, which launched in September 2018, offered more daily coverage than Spotlight PA, and was seen on occasion as a competitor, especially during the pandemic. Through discussions among leaders, Spotlight PA acquired the PA Post newsletter brand and more than 4,000 email subscribers. PA Post also enjoyed at the time a digital presence of nearly 60,000 average monthly unique users to its website.

“There were times along this journey I was disappointed or saddened by PA Post’s disappearance,” said Pavelko, who had brought in the PA Post concept as part of WITF’s turn toward digital audiences prior to her April 2019 retirement. “But now that I’ve been with Spotlight virtually from the beginning [and] more recently on the board ... I’ve come to see that Spotlight PA is absolutely the robust evolution of what I initially thought of at PA Post,” she said.

Pavelko credits Baxter’s leadership as essential to Spotlight PA’s ultimate takeover of the PA Post. “I will also say that Chris Baxter, once he became the editor, was also a remarkable leader, and I think made a very effective case to Lenfest and to some other funders as well. That Spotlight was the stronger light in the firmament, and that if they

were going to lay down a bet, that was a good bet to lay down,” she said.

Spotlight PA’s narrower focus on government issues made its value proposition more competitive, and business operations simpler, as compared to PA Post and WITF.

“Spotlight PA had a single focus, WITF continued to do many things,” said Pavelko. “PA Post was just one of the things WITF did ... so we had our board and executive attention more

distributed across very large, longstanding priorities, and that was not the case for Spotlight PA and its key supporter, Lenfest.”

Baxter also saw using restraint as a strategy. “I wanted to avoid the pitfall that I’ve seen and actually continue to see, which is that some startups try to replicate the ‘be everything to everyone’ model,” he said. “I don’t necessarily think it’s what people need from us anymore ... information is more distributed now, it’s more personalized, and it’s more on demand.” ■



Christopher Baxter, CEO and President, Spotlight PA

Using communications as a driving organizational imperative

Spotlight PA makes strategic communications a priority, and this has driven its engagement with audiences, funders, and partners.

“I am the chief marketing officer every second of every day ... We cannot message enough, we cannot ask enough in my mind,” said Baxter.

Baxter said he focuses on all aspects of the marketing pitches Spotlight PA makes — from testing email subject lines to studying what works in other fields, such as political fundraising. In 2024, Spotlight PA grew its small-dollar donations by \$100,000 year over year.

“Marketing is a cornerstone to running any successful business,” said Tristan Loper, head of national programs at The Lenfest Institute. “Chris has a solid pitch, and it really feels like he could translate that to any sort of audience.”

Explaining regularly and simply what Spotlight PA does is part of the organization’s strength and harnesses greater trust.

“We aren’t afraid to say who we are and what we are and what we’re doing, and I think people have attached to that,” said Baxter.

Explaining regularly and simply what Spotlight PA does is part of the organization’s strength, and harnesses greater trust.

Baxter also focuses on direct connections. He writes thank you notes. He reaches out to critics directly. And he often makes a practice of meeting with people in person. “Chris wanted to meet in person, and I respected that,” said Dubrow. “Sometimes face-to-face you can just really sense somebody a little bit better.”

2023-2025 PHASE 4

Strengthening its statewide approach, venturing independently

As Spotlight grew its partnerships and reach, there was a growing need for discipline and clarity around its structure and mission.

This became apparent in some fundraising conversations.

“Everything grew so much faster than even I anticipated that we just quickly outgrew operating through another newsroom,” said Baxter. “The complexity of being sort of part of [The Inquirer] and sort of part of the Institute, caused a lot of funders to have questions.”

Spotlight PA benefited tremendously from the backing of The Lenfest Institute, but once the organization was stable — with steady, diverse revenue streams complementing a well-tested value proposition — it was ready to become an independent nonprofit business. Spotlight PA became a standalone entity in August 2023. The process required significant operational changes and a new level of sophistication for Spotlight PA in terms of human resources, operations, development, and finance capacities: moving payroll and benefits to new systems, separating the fundraising apparatus and related software programs, and setting up the independent legal structures for the organization.

This move signaled a new phase in the collaborative efforts behind Spotlight PA. While it continued to rely on the foundational support and relationships with many of its earliest collaborators, Spotlight PA focused on additional partnerships and new community newsrooms, expanding and growing as its own singular entity’s strength and reach. This new phase also signaled an increasing sophistication as an organization

— developing hallmark communications, solidifying its business strategy, and prioritizing employees.

Evolving the business strategy

Back in fall 2020, Spotlight PA received a \$1 million gift that changed Baxter’s outlook about fundraising. The donor requested two conditions: 1) the money be spent, and 2) Baxter stay on as the leader.

“From there on, I understood much better how to build relationships with funders and program officers and individual donors that were authentic and personal ... I have a lot of strategies about personalizing the work, personalizing the organization, and personalizing myself to people. So a lot of good came from that,” Baxter said.

In early 2022, the American Journalism Project announced a \$1 million grant to Spotlight PA, and the Institute matched it with another \$1 million. This marked a transformative moment

Diversified revenue among supporters has been key to the organization’s sustainability

for the organization to invest in its model.

Diversified revenue among supporters has been key to the organization’s sustainability, allowing the funding buckets to shift with time — and empowering Spotlight PA to build off of its initial early successes.

“Those launch gifts are not necessarily sustainable over time at the scale they’re given to you,” Forman said.

According to its most recent impact report, Spotlight PA has raised more than \$17 million from 50 foundations, nonprofits, and media

partners, as well as more than 11,000 individual donors. There is also a growing effort to generate revenue via events and newsletter sponsorships.

In addition to a major giving program targeting the philanthropic sector, there is an individual leadership giving program, created by Spotlight PA’s Director of Individual and Corporate Giving, Michelle Mertz, who was hired in 2022. As of December 2025: 142 donors gave between \$1,000 to \$2,499. Twenty-eight donors gave between \$2,500 and \$4,999. Nineteen donors gave between \$5,000 and \$9,999, and 10 gave \$10,000-\$49,999. Four donors provided more than \$50,000 each.

Individuals who donate less than \$1,000 per year are considered Spotlight PA members. The membership program has grown from about 1,500 individuals in 2020 to more than 7,000 in 2025.

“There was a very conscious effort to wean dependence off a single funder and to be there in a kind of a matching function from the very start, and help them bring in other funding,” said Friedlich, The Lenfest Institute’s executive director and CEO.

Spotlight PA can see how its partnership model fits its business model. “We can look at geographies that were outpacing the average on increased individual giving, and those were the places where partners used our work more often,” said Baxter.

Expanding Spotlight PA’s scope and deepening local connections

In summer 2022, the organization launched its first community newsroom in State College, piloting a strategy to cover both local and state news in Pennsylvania. As an extension of its statewide reporting, the bureau signaled an evolving strategy for Spotlight PA that now

This evolving nature of Spotlight PA mirrored the evolving reality of the news industry’s business model, and to the broader reality of change management in business.

emphasizes local news coverage in addition to its investigative, statewide reporting.

The bureau, which serves 14 counties in north-central Pennsylvania, became a successful pilot and led to the development of a bureau in Berks County and early plans for one in the Lehigh Valley. In summer 2025, the American Journalism Project announced a second major grant of \$1.8 million to Spotlight PA to support this expansion.

This evolving nature of Spotlight PA mirrored the evolving reality of the news industry’s business model, and the broader reality of change management in business.

“Our money is a mechanism to allow [Baxter] the resources and time and experimentation and strategies to be able to construct whatever the new reality is,” said Toccket. “No one’s got it figured out, and no one is going to do it in two or three or five, or maybe even 10 years ... essentially we’re subsidizing the work of building the new industry.”

This can also lead to some tension with other local news organizations already covering their communities. McAllister of the Centre Daily Times described their partnership as productive and said she appreciates the cross-promotion each organization does on social media and in newsletters. In comparison to other partnership organizations, she said she “has no complaints.” That said “the reality is — and I value them so much — but they are not a replacement for daily journalism, for a community daily newspaper. And sometimes I wish that message was more clear from them too.”

When asked what this could look like, she said, “In some of those columns from Christopher, we can project this world where we really need both, and we should have both.”

Boardman also acknowledged some concern about the long-term relationships with newsroom partners: “In all of these communities – whether it be State College, Reading, or Philadelphia – we need more media, not less and more than ever, we need to think about news in an ecosystem. No single source is going to adequately serve a community and we have to continue to work on new ways to serve the public together.”

> Reporter Marley Parish and editor/reporter Katie Meyer at the Pennsylvania state Capitol. Photo by Dani Fresh.

Prioritizing reporter retention and well-being

Another key moment in this evolution for Spotlight PA was the unionization of the staff, with the first collective bargaining agreement ratified in January 2025. This move was widely seen as a positive indicator of the organization’s maturity, further cementing its future within the news industry. In a press release from The NewsGuild-CWA, the unit chair and investigative reporter Danielle Ohi said, “Spotlight PA can be the model for other newsrooms that you don’t have to be so acrimonious toward unions.”

Baxter also wrote about the unionization process on LinkedIn, capturing one of the essential lessons from his first five years

with Spotlight PA: “Our staff knows that I understand their work, that I respect it, and that nothing else we do matters without it. From there, we were able to have candid and honest conversations about how to best make a future together.”

Healthy partnerships between leadership and staff are a priority for Baxter. In the spring and summer of 2021, three reporters left in a six-month timeframe. “Coming out of COVID, we had a bunch of turnover of our original reporting staff,” said Baxter, who described this as a particularly challenging moment that helped shape his leadership approach. Spotlight PA benefits from the institutional knowledge and stability of several longtime staffers: Sarah Hughes has served as deputy editor since 2020; Coulombis has worked as an investigative journalist since 2019; and Bernstein has worked for Spotlight PA since 2019.

The recent unionization suggests the organization’s approach to employee management is maturing. ■



PENNSYLVANIA: The “purple-state approach”

Pennsylvania is a big state with a small world of journalism operators.

As a swing state – and one of the biggest states in the Electoral College – there’s more attention to politics here. Spotlight PA’s set-up – thanks to its newsroom partnership model, its statewide approach, and its nonpartisan voice – make it ideal for the region.

Spotlight PA’s set-up – thanks to its newsroom partnership model, its statewide approach, and its nonpartisan voice – make it ideal for the region.

“Its content really has to play well and be of impact in Erie as well as Philadelphia and Scranton, as well as Pittsburgh ... that leads to a different perspective and a different voice and a different approach to building the case for local news,” said Friedlich. “It’s devoutly nonpartisan, and is a kind of a purple-state approach, and that is what connects the history with the present, and I think it’s fundamental to [Spotlight PA’s] success.”

TIP

This helped the donor pitch, especially outside of the state. What’s more, state government policies increased the need for a journalism watchdog presence, helping the case for support, according to Forman, who said, “Pennsylvania in particular is a very opaque state. We have a lot of challenging laws at the state level ... Information is so important, and I think that benefited Spotlight in its early days because people outside of Pennsylvania also cared about good information in Pennsylvania.”

Loper also called attention to the diversity within the state as an opportunity for a statewide news organization to bring together Pennsylvanians.

“Pennsylvania is a really interesting state. You have basically two coasts, Pittsburgh and Philly, and then you have all this in the middle ... and it is really diverse in the most literal sense,” he said. “You have everything from rural counties with no broadband to urban areas. You have this odd, depressed state capital, and then you have Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. You have the place where Trump was shot ... you have this huge population, and it’s a swing state allegedly. It swings.”

In one of his columns, Baxter explained the value of Spotlight PA through a bipartisan lens and made it part of a fundraising pitch for why Spotlight PA needs support.*

“ The challenges facing our state don’t wear party labels. Neither does good journalism. In an era when trust is in short supply, Spotlight PA earns it through rigorous fact-checking and document-based reporting that creates a foundation of truth we can all stand upon. By supporting Spotlight PA, you’re not endorsing a political agenda — you’re investing in the accountability mechanisms that safeguard Pennsylvania’s independence, communities, and constitutional governance. You’re helping preserve the values that make our Commonwealth special.”

*“Turn frustration into action by supporting local journalism that gets results.” by Christopher Baxter on March 17, 2025.

Impact

115

awards or
finalist honors

\$20 million

taxpayer dollars saved
or returned

35

policies changed

14

new bills

8

legal victories

From its early days, Spotlight PA's collaborative approach has generated impact that can be felt across the state.



Spotlight PA government reporter Kate Huangpu interviews community members. Photo by Jared Wickerham for Spotlight PA



Spotlight PA Managing Editor, Standards & Topics Stephen Kearse. Photo by Dani Fresh.

What's more, its growth, in an era otherwise of shrinking journalism opportunities, highlights a necessary reminder of journalism's purpose and value to our communities.

“Its content really has to play well and be of impact in Erie as well as Philadelphia and Scranton, as well as Pittsburgh ... that leads to a different perspective and a different voice and a different approach to building the case for local news.”

Jim Friedlich, Executive Director & CEO, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism



The campus of Penn State University in State College. Spotlight PA has prioritized coverage of the university. Photo by Georgianna Sutherland.



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