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Joint Committee on Community Development and Small Businesses
Massachusetts Legislature

Testimony of Free Press Action's Heather Franklin on Bill H.181/S.80 and Efforts to Address Journalism in Underserved Communities

Chairwoman DiZoglio, Chairman Coppinger, members of the committee, thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify.

My name is Heather Franklin, and I am a digital campaigner at Free Press Action, a nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 2003 to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media.

I am testifying today on Bill H.181, which would establish a 17-member commission to study journalism in underserved communities across the commonwealth.

While Free Press Action is a national organization, Massachusetts is our home, with the organization's headquarters and a third of our staff based in Florence.

In 2011, we organized a National Conference on Media Reform in Boston, bringing together hundreds of journalists, media makers, and media-justice advocates from the commonwealth and across the country. Free Press Action has been active in the Western Massachusetts Media Justice Network, made up of media practitioners, educators and activists in the Pioneer Valley who discuss media advocacy and media policy. Many of our staff are involved in local efforts here to strengthen media and journalism where they live, and have started local radio stations, sit on boards of community-access stations, and have led efforts to deliver broadband internet to rural communities.

Over the last two decades, runaway media consolidation has shuttered newsrooms and led to thousands of journalist layoffs around the country, leaving many communities without any local-news coverage. Since 2015, Free Press Action has worked to address the local-journalism crisis through our [News Voices](#) project, which activates the public to strengthen local news through policy change and collaborations with media outlets.

So it is with great interest that we are now seeing similar efforts to address the local-news crisis in our home state of Massachusetts. We applaud Representative Ehrlich and Senator Crighton for taking action to address this crisis — action that is urgently needed.

Despite the work of many talented journalists across Massachusetts, media coverage around the commonwealth has declined rapidly. Since 2004, 15 percent of newspapers in Massachusetts have

closed down, while newspaper circulation has declined by 39 percent.¹ For the remaining media outlets, years of mergers and cuts have left newsrooms unable to conduct accountability journalism and public-interest reporting. According to a recent nationwide study, only 17 percent of stories published in local-media outlets are about local issues and events.²

This isn't just bad news for the journalism industry. It's bad news for the future of our communities.

Studies have shown that when local news is deficient or disappears altogether, the public suffers. In communities where local news has vanished, government costs have increased due to a lack of scrutiny over deals and contracts.³ When local-media outlets shut down, civic engagement plummets.⁴

And let's be clear: The crisis in local news is not affecting all communities equally. While national outlets and large metropolitan dailies have been better situated to weather the news industry's changing economics, mid-size papers have been hardest hit with newsroom cuts. Meanwhile, new online outlets have been largely concentrated in affluent communities. As a recent *Wall Street Journal* analysis of the news business put it, "The result is that rural areas and poor neighborhoods are fast becoming news deserts."⁵

Studying how the crisis in local journalism is playing out in Massachusetts — and how it disproportionately impacts low-income communities — is a vital first step to building local news and information that Massachusetts communities need and deserve.

While government intervention is necessary to ensure an informed and engaged citizenry — indeed, favorable policies to support a thriving press date back to the start of the republic — we believe Bill H.181 could be strengthened in two critical ways.

First, the commission established by H.181 would benefit from the perspectives of people who are working with communities impacted by the dearth of local reporting.

There are many innovators leading efforts to fill local-news gaps using new business models and reporting practices. These practitioners are on the frontlines of efforts to invigorate local news. They possess expertise on the challenges that emerging sustainability models pose and insights on new ways to serve immigrants, working-class communities, and communities of color with public-interest

¹ "The Expanding News Desert," Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, November 2018: <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/states/massachusetts/>

² "What Communities Are at Risk of Becoming News Deserts?" Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Oct. 4, 2018: <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/spotlight-research/phil-napoli-two/>

³ "The Hidden Costs of Losing Your City's Newspaper," CityLab, May 30, 2018: <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/05/study-when-local-newspaper-close-city-bond-finances-suffer/561422/>

⁴ "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement," Jan. 30, 2014: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817>

⁵ "In News Industry, a Stark Divide Between the Haves and Have-Nots," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2019: <https://www.wsj.com/graphics/local-newspapers-stark-divide/>



journalism. We believe the commission would be well-served by including these media innovators, and would be better able to capture the possibilities and challenges that exist in creating sustainable media for underserved communities.

Second, we urge policymakers and others working to strengthen local news to engage the public in conversations around the kinds of reporting their communities need.

In New Jersey, for example, Free Press Action collaborated with community organizations across the state to hear from residents about how the local-news crisis is impacting them, and what sorts of reporting and information would help them become more informed and engaged. We held a series of community forums about these issues, and thousands of residents attended and weighed in. Free Press Action engaged the public and worked closely alongside state lawmakers, public universities and media partners to develop and ultimately pass the Civic Information Bill — groundbreaking legislation to fund local news-and-information initiatives across New Jersey.

What that process showed is that local communities — particularly those lacking local-news media — are eager to take part in conversations about how to build sustainable, trustworthy local news, and are brimming with ideas on what that would look like in their communities. To limit the discussion on the future of local news to academics, journalists and policymakers leaves the most important constituents out of the room.

With more community involvement and participation from emerging media innovators, Bill H.181 would allow Massachusetts to play a leading role in addressing the local-news crisis. Free Press Action looks forward to supporting efforts to strengthen local journalism across the commonwealth. We thank you again for your action on this important issue, and for considering our testimony.

Sincerely,

Heather Franklin
Digital Campaigner
Free Press Action