

Michigan NPR, PBS forge alliances to survive as public media organization shutter

By Sherri Welch
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Public media affiliates in Michigan are looking at ways to maintain future programming after the nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting announced Monday that it will shut down after a congressional clawback of \$1.1 billion in funding.

The move comes as public media outlets are already weathering federal funding cuts with layoffs and program reductions. Now, outlets are seeking ways to fundraise, share costs and collaborate to survive.

Following the congressional clawback of \$1.1 billion in previously appropriated federal funding for the CPB and public media, CPB's board voted to dissolve to protect the integrity of public media, the stations and leaders, its leaders said.

"While Congress has chosen to eliminate appropriations for CPB, the legislative foundation that recognizes the value and necessity of public broadcasting remains intact," Chair Ruby Calvert and President and CEO Patricia Harrison said in a letter to public media station general managers and system leaders, pointing to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which established the principles and legal framework for public broadcasting in the U.S.

"The principles enshrined in the act — editorial independence, localism, universal service, educational mission, and service to underserved communities — remain as vital guideposts for the future of public media," the CPB's top leaders said.

The CPB administered federal funds to support programming and infrastructure needs for National Public Radio and PBS television outlets. It also negotiated music licensing agreements and satellite services contracts to enable NPR and PBS to distribute programs nationally.

As one of its final actions to support public media affiliates, the CPB negotiated and paid for satellite services and programming licensing agreements for affiliates through 2027, public media leaders in metro Detroit said.

There's going to be a long list of issues affiliates will have to address going forward, said Rich Homberg, president and CEO of Detroit PBS.

"The key to all this is to build it on a very strong foundation, so knowing that systems (and rights) will continue to be maintained through '27 ... takes two important issues off the checklist," he said.

Making up for lost funding

With those fundamental infrastructure and programmatic needs covered, for now, local public media outlets continue to work on filling the funding gaps left after Congress voted to cut previously appropriated funding to public broadcasting. The cuts have led to layoffs and programmatic cuts at many Michigan affiliates.

Detroit PBS and 90.9 WRCJ saw a \$3 million cut, funding it used to pay for its PBS membership to get access to national programs, Homberg said.

"We've been very disciplined around locally engaging the community and showing them all that we've developed for Detroit, and we've had an unbelievable response to it," Homberg said.

Today, more than 80,000 people are members of Detroit PBS and WRCJ and support the station, up from 67,000 a year ago, he said.

"We have effectively replaced the federal funding cut for this year," Homberg said. "The challenge we have is how to continue and sustain that."

Detroit public radio station WDET 101.9 FM lost its \$300,000 community services grant (about 6% of its annual budget), General Manager Mary Zatina told Crain's. The Skillman, Kresge and Erb Family foundations have stepped up with support for WDET because of its ongoing coverage of children, education and families in the news department, Zatina said. WDET has raised roughly one-third of the funding it has lost, she said.

Listeners (about 200,000 last year) have also been turning out "big time," she said, noting a successful fundraising push in December and the addition of 2,500 members at WDET last year.

"Now, those gifts are smaller than what foundations can give, but it is hugely important for our ongoing well-being to have a broad base of listener support," Zatina said.

The CPB's move to ensure agreements for satellite service and licensing are in place for the next two years saved the radio station from having to raise an estimated \$250,000 more this year and next, she said.

Public media outlets will need to figure out a collective response to handle those agreements beyond 2027, Zatina said. Radio affiliates are already talking about how they can collaborate to maintain programs and cut costs.

"We're looking for what more can we do to help each other?" she said.

Through the Michigan Public Radio Network, news teams at Michigan's public radio stations are already making stories of general interest to the state available digitally through the internet for other stations to use, she said. WDET is talking with other public radio stations in Michigan about making more of its content — 80% produced locally — available across the network, Zatina said.

"We're exploring those things at the state level," Zatina said. "And then definitely, we're going to be willing partners in anything happening nationally ... we will be active participants in whatever we have to do as a system and a network to keep everybody going."

PBS collaboration

Conversations aimed at ramping up collaboration among public television affiliates are also underway, Homberg said.

He pointed to the collaboration going back five or more years that led to the launch of the Michigan Learning Channel, a 24/7 distance learning channel that delivers content via every PBS station in the state.

"We're talking with stations across the state about opportunities to be more efficient, more effective and work together in much the same way," Homberg said.

Talks are centering on how public television can adjust in the long run as a system and collaborate more to be as efficient and effective as possible, he said.

Nationally, there are a variety of efforts also taking shape, Homberg said, pointing to a public media company in Minneapolis that is raising dollars to keep stations in rural communities on the air and support them.

Leaders of major market stations are also meeting monthly to talk about opportunities, he said.