

U.S. Reps. Sensenbrenner, Cicilline: Lead bipartisan effort to support local news outlets during COVID-19 pandemic

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Washington, D.C.— **Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner** (WI-05) and Congressman David Cicilline (RI-01) are leading more than 120 members of both parties in providing for access to funding for local news publishers and broadcasters in the next COVID-19 relief package.

Rep. Sensenbrenner: *“The nation is at war with COVID-19 and America’s local media has not been immune to the effects of the virus on local communities. Local newspapers, radio stations, and television broadcasts play a pivotal role in connecting communities with vital information. I am proud to lead a group of more than 120 House members in bipartisan support of local news publishers and broadcasters in the next COVID-19 relief package. Local news employs thousands of workers in addition to reporters and photographers. Newsroom support staff, technical support operators, and printer publishers are just a few of the examples of hardworking Americans that keep local journalism in motion. Now, more than ever, local news provides essential information regarding public health and safety, local events, and democracy. Accurate, reliable, and trustworthy sources of information are vital in this time of need.”*

The full text of the my letter to House leadership and a list of signers is embedded below. A PDF copy of the letter, as delivered, can be downloaded by clicking [here](#).

Dear Madam Speaker and Minority Leader McCarthy:

We write to ask that any future stimulus package to address the coronavirus pandemic include immediate improvements to existing lending programs to protect local news publishers and broadcasters.

Reliable local information and reporting in our communities is more important than ever—newspapers and broadcasters are working “around the clock, often in dangerous conditions, to consistently get critical and timely information to the public.”¹ Local news publishers and broadcasters employ thousands of journalists—including reporters, photographers, newsroom staff, and others—to provide timely and accurate news to keep people informed about their communities.² Under ordinary circumstances, this work is essential to public health and safety, local businesses, and our democracy. But it is more important than ever as our country responds to and recovers from the COVID-19 crisis.

In recent years, local news sources have been in an economic freefall. From 2006 to 2017, advertising revenue has fallen from \$49 billion to \$15.6 billion, combined with a changing online landscape, resulting in mass layoffs or news sources folding altogether.³ In the past several years alone, thousands of journalists that work in our communities have lost their jobs. For example, last year, the Cleveland Plain Dealer announced another round of layoffs due to advertising losses, reducing its staff by 80% from employment levels just seven years ago.⁴ Just last week, the Cleveland Plain Dealer announced that it has reduced its staff to fourteen employees, who were notified that “most will no longer be covering news in Cleveland, Cuyahoga County or for the state of Ohio.”⁵

This economic crisis has accelerated in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. According to a coalition of news organizations—including the News Media Alliance, National Newspaper Association, National Association of Broadcasters, and America’s Newspapers—there has been a steep decline in advertising revenue from local businesses shuttering such as retail, restaurants, and more.⁶ Broadcasting alone estimates a minimum loss of at least \$3 billion in advertising thus far.

The small business provisions enacted as part of the recent stimulus bill provided some relief for select news publishers and broadcasters and many small stations or newspapers have been able to apply for Small Business Administration (SBA) loans,

but many have not because the eligibility requirements were not inclusive enough to capture them. Hundreds of individual broadcasters and news publishers were not eligible for loan relief because they were affiliated with larger groups whose total employee count was more than 500 spread across various stations or newspapers.

We therefore urge you to protect local journalism by clarifying that local news publishers and broadcasters that meet the SBA's size standards and primarily serve a single community or metropolitan area qualify for the newly established Paycheck Protection Program regardless of their affiliation. Congress established the Paycheck Protection Program—or the appropriate small business spending program in an upcoming stimulus package—to provide small businesses with a direct incentive to keep their workers on the payroll during this crisis. Many local news publishers and broadcasters, however, may sometimes consist of a small team of local journalists, personalities or sales staff that are part of larger ownership groups. Nevertheless, these publishers and broadcasters operate almost entirely locally. In light of this, it is essential that Congress clarifies that loans that are provided under the Paycheck Protection Program are determined on a local and individual basis for news publishers and broadcasters.

Importantly, these funds should support local newsgathering—there should be clear guardrails and oversight to ensure they are spent locally.

Accurate, reliable, and trustworthy sources of information are vital in this time of need. Congress must do everything possible to protect local news sources during this crisis to safeguard our democracy and keep our communities informed as our nation responds to the crisis. We respectfully urge you to address this issue as part of the appropriate stimulus package.

Sincerely,

David N. Cicilline
Chairman
House Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and Administrative Law

James Sensenbrenner
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial and Administrative Law

