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Testimony of Tim Franklin

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Last October, Hurricane Helene deluged western North Carolina with more than a foot of unrelenting rain and punishing winds, washing away roads, irreparably damaging homes, knocking out the power grid and making water supply unsafe.

Amid this epic devastation, there was a dedicated local news organization that provided life-saving emergency and recovery information for residents – Blue Ridge Public Radio. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, it was public radio that provided reliable news and information to communities isolated by the devastation of the storm.

Public radio was the lifeline that came from the airwaves.

This is just one illustration of how NPR member stations are fulfilling a vital public service mission in communities of all sizes and in all regions across America. And it's doing so at a time when legacy local newspapers are closing at a rate of 2 ½ per week, creating vast local news deserts that deprive more than 53 million Americans of basic information about their communities.

My name is Tim Franklin. I'm the Senior Associate Dean of the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University. I'm also the Director of the Medill Local News

Initiative, which conducts extensive research on the health of local news in the U.S.

One of our programs is the Medill State of Local News Project, which tracks every professional local newspaper, digital-only outlet, ethnic media organization and public radio station in every county in the U.S. Our database includes nearly 8,000 news organizations.

Since 2005, the U.S. has lost one-third of its local newspapers, more than 3,200 in total. These losses have hit rural parts of the country especially hard. Indeed, 79% of the more than 200 news desert counties are in areas defined as rural, our research shows.

Various studies have chronicled the devastating impact of the loss of local news in these communities. Civic participation declines. Government borrowing costs rise. Misinformation flourishes. Residents know less about their neighbors, their schools, their small businesses and the activities of their local government. There's a loss of social cohesion.

Amid the collapse of the local news business model and the widening of news deserts, public radio's presence has taken on even greater significance. That's especially true at a time when the newspaper industry alone lost 7,000 jobs in 2023.

There are about 400 public radio stations in the U.S., and more than 1,100 when one includes so-called “repeaters” that operate multiple signals. All told, they reach 98% of the U.S. population.

Most NPR member stations are locally owned and operated by nonprofit organizations, colleges or universities in the communities they serve. They are not Washington-driven operations. They are independent stations accountable to their local communities and supported by them. NPR produces and distributes news and cultural programming, but station decisions are made locally.

There are about 2,300 journalists at the more than 200 stations that are producing original local news reporting for their communities.

With local journalism shrinking rapidly, these stations and their journalists are playing a critical role meeting community information needs.

Medill research shows that public radio broadcasts into 67 counties that have no other local source of news. Public radio also reaches another 658 counties with only one remaining locally based news outlet.

Against this backdrop, a 2023 study by Thomas E. Patterson at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government found that “most

local public radio stations serve communities where the quality and quantity of local news and public affairs information is inadequate.”

The Harvard report suggested that new funding be allocated to “well-positioned stations in communities where the decline of the local newspaper has created a severe deficit in local news and public affairs information.”

Consider the situation in five counties in Alaska. Public radio is the sole provider of local news for the 32,000 residents in those counties, according to Medill research. Far removed from the debates in Washington, we found these stations providing vital, original, useful community information about everything from after-school programs for kids to the renovation of a local hiking trail.

Public radio stations also are banding together to form regional networks of reporters aimed at producing news and information for communities that have lost a newspaper, helping to fill the void in news deserts.

Last October, hurricane-ravaged western North Carolina was the antithesis of a desert.

A report released March 21st by the National Hurricane Center detailed the utter devastation that Helene inflicted on the area. Yancy Township

got 31 inches of rain. Mt. Mitchell recorded wind gusts of more than 100 miles per hour. There were 2,000 landslides. The Ivy River shattered its previous record flood level -- *by nine feet*.

Indeed, the residents of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina experienced first-hand the life-saving importance of local news offered by Blue Ridge Public Radio. It was public radio doing a public good.