Feature
Eyes Upon the Street
By Julie Sandorf
The decline of local journalism in the United States is fueling a civic crisis. Philanthropy, government, and citizens must step in to save our communities. As someone who has funded a news startup in New York City, I suggest a path we can follow to renew our commitment to a vibrant press.

A taxi swerved onto the sidewalk at the intersection of Fulton and Adelphi streets in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene neighborhood and knocked over a pedestrian signal. This incident might be considered a story with a happy ending, since the only loss was the crosswalk post. But in a world without local news coverage, an accident averted is not a story at all, and neither, it turned out, was a traffic sign that remained broken for months afterward.

You would expect New York City to have moved quickly to repair the broken crosswalk light. After all, Mayor Bill de Blasio made preventing traffic deaths a top priority with his Vision Zero program, a comprehensive plan to make city streets safer through expanded enforcement, new signs, swifter repairs, and street designs. He announced his initiative just a few blocks from Fulton and Adelphi, an area of heavy and hazardous traffic, in 2014. In 2018, the city recorded only 200 traffic deaths, the lowest in a century, but the number of pedestrian fatalities, 117, grew from the previous year. Disappointed by this trend, de Blasio said he would do more.

Despite the mayor’s promises, though, nothing happened with the crosswalk signal—except for the placement of an orange cone on top of the outcrop of wires where the light pole had been sheared away.

A busted traffic device may seem trivial, but it represents both a safety hazard and the community’s festering frustration about whether anyone is even paying attention to their problems. It is just one tiny data point in a larger mosaic of civic crises that cities and towns across the United States are facing because of decaying infrastructure, lack of investment, fraying social services, political dysfunction, and public inattention.

In her 1961 classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs described how city life emerged from countless small relationships and residents’ belief that decision makers understood them and their needs. She held that decisions about a city’s development should be based on reality as observed on the street, not on theories or politics developed from afar. She famously described the importance of “eyes upon the street” to keep people safe. She meant this literally: pedestrians, shopkeepers, neighbors looking out their windows. But, given her profound commitment to observing city life accurately and then basing action on those observations, I think it’s fair to extend her definition of watchful eyes to include journalists looking out for the neighborhood—and, by extension, whole towns and cities.

This inference brings me to one of the causes of our sustained civic crisis: the collapse of local news. Far fewer local journalists are working today in the United States than existed at the turn of the century. This is true even in New York, the capital of national media and the city I call home. This decline is much greater in the rest of the country, undermining our communities much like city planners,
ignorant of lived neighborhoods and blind to the ways cities really work, undermined urban life 60 years ago, according to Jacobs. She wanted planners to descend from their ivory towers and walk the streets. We need more reporters doing the same thing today. Either way, the missing piece is shoe-leather beat reporting: seeing, hearing, and even smelling what’s going on block by block.

I want to discuss the collapse of local news coverage, what we can do to rebuild it, and why this problem is too important to be left only to people in the media, since journalists can’t do it alone. This rebuilding is part of, although by no means all of, a civic-repair program we must pursue to restore the democratic promise of our cities and of our country.

**NEWS DESERTS**

The digital revolution has connected us in ways that no one could have imagined at the turn of the 21st century, reshaping how we purchase goods and services, how we seek and maintain friendships and intimate relationships, and how we communicate with each other. It has transformed the way we get news, what kinds of news we get, and how that content gets paid for. Under the traditional business model, newspapers cross-subsidize the cost of reporting with advertising and circulation sales. But the mass migration of ad revenues to the major tech platforms has upended that model. Google and Facebook alone capture almost 60 percent of digital ad spending in the United States and 77 percent in local markets, The Wall Street Journal reports.

Digital disruption has dealt the newspaper industry a devastating blow, according to data compiled by Michael Barthel, senior researcher at the Pew Research Center. In 2000, newspaper advertising revenues exceeded $48 billion. In 2009, they fell by almost 50 percent, to $27 billion, and by 2018, to $14.3 billion. Average weekday circulation numbers decreased from 55.8 million (print only) in 2000 to 29 million in 2018, a figure that includes both print and digital readers. The number of newsroom reporters dropped from 71,640 in 2004 to 39,210 in 2017, and media companies have eliminated nearly 60 percent of all newspaper jobs since 1990—more than in the depressed steel and coal industries.

The collapse of the old advertising model that supported journalism in the 20th century has been particularly destructive to local news. News deserts—a concept that would have been considered laughable a decade ago—are spreading like contagion and threatening the health, welfare, and civic vitality of small towns and big cities alike.

Almost 1,800 local newspapers closed between 2004 and 2018, leaving about 1,300 communities with no local news coverage. The Gannett-GateHouse media merger, announced in August 2019, will be financed by burdening an already beleaguered business with $1.8 billion in debt and by slashing annual operating costs by upwards of $500 million. This step puts at risk more than 250 daily newspapers and hundreds more weekly and community papers located in almost every state in the country.

Midsize cities and larger metro areas are hardly faring better. Between 2012 and 2018, the median drop in circulation at metro papers such as the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, and Dallas Morning News was between 41 and 45 percent, compared with an average 29 percent decline at the three preeminent national papers: The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal. Last May, the 182-year-old New Orleans Times-Picayune sold itself to its competitor and laid off all its staff, and The Vindicator, Youngstown, Ohio’s, only newspaper, shut its doors on August 30, after a 150-year run.

New York City’s reign as the media capital of the world and its outsize population of almost 9 million residents does not render it immune to the ravages of the market failure that is devastating quality local journalism elsewhere in the country. Between 2013 and 2018, New York City lost more than 125 local journalists solely from the combination of layoffs, buyouts, or closures at The New York Times, the Daily News, The Village Voice, and DNAinfo. A survey of the New York Times Metro section documented a reduction in local stories per week from 153 in 2001 to 48 in 2017. The Daily News no longer employs a single beat reporter covering the outer boroughs, and The Wall Street Journal canceled its stand-alone Greater New York section in favor of much-trimmed-down coverage. By 2018, no one was covering the courthouses and the once fearsome city hall press corps was a mere shadow of its former self.

**COSTS TO THE COMMUNITY**

The decline of local coverage—a lack of eyes upon the street—leads to chronic civic problems. Jane Jacobs warned that one of the great destroyers of community was the shared feeling—and the reality—of not being listened to. One of her most powerful examples was an East Harlem housing project’s forlorn plot of grass, which became a danger zone for its residents. A tenant explained:

> Nobody cared what we wanted when they built this place. They threw our houses down and pushed us here and pushed our friends somewhere else. We don’t have a place around here to get a cup of coffee or a newspaper... Nobody cared what we need. But the big men come and look at that grass and say, “Isn’t it wonderful! Now the poor have everything!”

That painful cry of political abandonment can be heard across the country these days, even in New York. Last year, the comptroller’s office issued a report highlighting the woeful state of playgrounds in New York City’s public housing. In response, the Housing Authority (NYCHA) vowed to inspect all of its nearly 800 playgrounds within 90 days. It never happened. In fact, four months later, rusty monkey bars fell on top of two children at a New York City housing project in, yes, East Harlem.

It turned out that NYCHA has no record of inspections at this playground or at any other. “It’s just ridiculous over there,” said one grandmother, who has lived in this development for 30 years. “I love my grandkids. I never let them play there.”

This past May, you could hear that same cry of abandonment at a city hall rally against pedestrian traffic deaths. Two years after the mayor said this topic was a priority, children were still dying under the wheels of buses. That streetlight in Brooklyn had been broken for two months. “Why does it have to take young people dying to fix a street?” asked a woman at the rally, whose son was killed by a Manhattan bus while crossing with the right of way.

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In places that lack news coverage, when a traffic light falls or when a child is injured because her playground goes uninspected, nobody hears about it—and communities of common interest have an even harder time holding anyone publicly responsible.

A community is made up of shared moments, and local news is crucial for sharing these moments. If these moments are lost, we all lose. A dearth of journalists may be behind the crisis, but the problem is too important to be left only to journalists. The fabric of our communities is something we all have to take responsibility for, because the very future of our cities and towns is at stake.

This is not hyperbole. Recent studies have demonstrated this point. For example, one showed that the closure of local newspapers leads to an increase in municipal borrowing costs, because government expenditures go unscrutinized. Another indicated that less local news coverage leads to the diminution of citizens’ political knowledge and participation. Cities with sharp declines in newsroom staffing had significantly reduced political competition in mayoral races. And the decline in local news reporting has contributed to a hyperfocus on national politics and greater political polarization.

Despite its importance, local news no longer scales commercially. This is a classic market failure; the private sector cannot meet a crucial community need. Philanthropy must step in to find new solutions, just as it has in the past with museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions.

We need a plan. Much like the public-private partnerships and community involvement that stimulated the revitalization of urban neighborhoods through the community development movement, we need to revitalize local coverage by building a new movement, of nonprofit journalism with a clear public mission shaped by business discipline and expertise. This means investing locally but thinking about building a critical mass of outlets that together demonstrate in markets both large and small the viability of new, noncommercial business models for local news. It means investing in technical assistance and expert guidance in building revenue streams, managing growth, developing audiences, and reaching out to communities. It means investing patient capital to restore an industry to sustainability so that it can serve the public.

I will be honest: This task is hard. I have just spent two years rounding up support for a new digital news organization for New York. I nearly gave up. But with the backing of a community-minded commercial media company and several fellow philanthropists, we launched our startup earlier this year, just in time to do something about that traffic light in Brooklyn.

A NEW VENTURE

The news organization that I helped launch is called The City. Its logo is a pigeon called Nellie Bly, named after the trailblazing investigative reporter Nellie Bly, who had herself committed to the state asylum on Blackwell’s Island (today’s Roosevelt Island) in the late 19th century—a local story, for Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World, that became a national sensation. Bly’s first-person account resulted in asylum reforms and an increased mental health budget.

The City’s mission is to produce rigorously reported stories that reflect New Yorkers’ concerns and experiences, connect people to the civic conversation, hold those in power to account, and ultimately drive action for public benefit. The newsroom is in a no-frills office in a ramshackle building in midtown Manhattan, but on any given day, reporters are out on the streets more than they are at their desks. Led by New York veteran journalists such as editor-in-chief Jere Hester and deputy editors Alyssa Katz and Hasani Gittens, The City has a diverse 19-person editorial and reporting team that aims to reflect New York. They include beat reporters based in each of the five boroughs and Albany; senior-level investigative and enterprise reporters; data journalists; and staff responsible for visuals, community engagement, and social media.

The City is filling gaps by covering a defined set of beats (transportation, housing, immigration, criminal justice, education, health) with an “eyes on the street” approach. These beats must be fluid; for example, public housing, beset by lead and mold, belongs to the health beat as much as to the housing beat. Publishing 18 original articles a week on average, The City connects the five boroughs by looking for local stories that are meaningful to a specific community and can lead to bigger stories. It is breaking and doggedly following up on neglect, incompetence, and outright corruption while demanding responses to issues that affect a wide breadth of New Yorkers.

A few days after one of The City’s reporters started asking about the streetlight, and the day after it published a story, complete with a picture of that sad orange cone, a new signal was at last installed. The publication also broke the story about the city’s failure to inspect playgrounds. The reporter delved into NYCHA’s own data and found an absence of actual inspections of playgrounds at public-housing sites.

This type of coverage is clearly still in demand. In just its first month of operation, stories from The City have been republished 23 times and quoted 143 times by 43 separate media organizations. The New York Times cited reporting by The City in an editorial criticizing the taint of conflict in Mayor de Blasio’s fundraising. And New York magazine’s Intelligencer partnered with The City to give a national platform to its coverage of the death of Layleen Polanco, a transgender woman who had been sent to Rikers Island city jail on misdemeanor charges because she couldn’t make $500 bail. She died on her ninth consecutive day in “punitive segregation”—the phrase the corrections department uses for solitary

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confinement. In response, department officials emptied the women’s solitary unit.

These exchanges show how a healthy news ecosystem should work, with various independent news operations building on each other’s work and fueling local conversation. If we want to maintain it, we need to find new ways to support it. For the foreseeable future, more of our local news will have to come from organizations like The City, whose model is nonprofit service journalism. The old business model of cross-subsidizing local news primarily through advertising is dead. New business models require a broad mix of revenue sources.

Take, for example, The Texas Tribune. Since its founding in 2009, the news organization has been among the most successful in proving the efficacy of this approach. Cofounded by Evan Smith, John Thornton, and Ross Ramsey, The Texas Tribune is a nonprofit, digital-first publication whose mission is to inform and engage Texans about public policy, politics, and issues to help them make better decisions in their civic lives. It launched with a staff of 17, an annual budget of just over $2 million, and $4 million in funding commitments from a diverse array of wealthy individuals, foundations, small donors, and corporate sponsors. Since its launch, it has become the largest statehouse bureau in the United States, hosting more than 50 events annually across the state. It also produces the Texas Tribune Festival, a nationally recognized event devoted to politics and policy in the Lone Star State.

Over the past 10 years, The Texas Tribune has raised $78 million and broadly variegated its revenue sources: 25 percent comes from foundations, 23 percent from individual donors, 19 percent from corporate sponsors, 18 percent from events, and 10 percent from members, according to its strategic vision. “It’s all about revenue promiscuity,” Thornton says of the successful growth and diversification of the organization’s funding sources.

In developing its own business model, The City benefited significantly from following the path trod by the pioneers in the emerging nonprofit local news arena. This trail includes crafting an economically feasible budget that balances ambition with a realistic projection of the potential for local funding. It also requires an adequate “runway” of financial support—18 months to two years—to attract talented leadership and staff, demonstrate the impact of the reporting, and establish nonprofit viability through attracting a much wider array of revenue sources. Of the $10 million The City raised in its first year, approximately 65 percent came from five foundations, 30 percent from seven individual large donors, and 5 percent from small donors and corporate sponsors. The City anticipates that by the end of its third year, sources of revenue will be highly diversified, with a larger number of foundations contributing less than 50 percent, and corporate sponsors, large individual gifts, corporate sponsorship, and individual small contributions and memberships playing a much larger role.

FIVE SAVIORS

How do we use revenue promiscuity to reinvent local news? Let me address five different groups who are essential to its revival: philanthropists; news consumers; journalists and their media organizations; government; and the digital platforms, such as Google and Facebook, whose success is related directly to the market failure of local news.

Philanthropists | First, as demonstrated in the initial funding of such successful local nonprofit news operations as The Texas Tribune, MinnPost, New Haven Independent, Voice of San Diego, and VTDigger, among others, foundations and individual philanthropists have a vital and very specific role. When the market fails and critical services go wanting, philanthropy must step up as a loss leader to help finance the reinvention of the business of news as a public service. Philanthropic investment—alongside a clear business strategy that recognizes from the get-go the need to prove marketability by attracting as broad a range of funding sources as possible—is essential to nearly all successful nonprofits. “Performing arts organizations generally generate only one-third of their expenses from earned income,” John Thornton says. “You wouldn’t ask the symphony to fire the woodwinds just because it didn’t sell enough tickets.”

Reinvention of a viable local news industry requires providing the time and capital, and accepting a level of risk that simply does not exist in the commercial market. The task is left to philanthropy. For decades, the Charles H. Revson Foundation has supported media and public policy organizations that hold government institutions responsible, with a particular focus on New York City. Our immediate concern with the decline of local accountability reporting aligns with our mission and our long-standing values. Revson is smaller than the more famous media-supporting foundations. We have an endowment of around $172 million and allocate annual grants of $6-$8 million in four different subject areas: urban affairs, education, Jewish life, and biomedical research. Over the past decade, however, Revson has committed almost $8 million to strengthening local journalism in New York—an outsize commitment compared with our overall grantmaking.

During the two years we worked with our partners to launch The City, we drew from more than a decade of experience at 200-plus not-for-profit news outlets already operating around the country. We looked very closely at what has worked so far and what has failed. The good news is that the sector is growing, revenue streams are increasingly diversifying, and individual donors are making up larger proportions of revenue. State and local newsrooms account for about 50 percent of news nonprofits, covering a wide range of social, economic, and political beats.

One clear lesson from our research was that successful startups require money from multiple sources. Revson partnered with the Leon Levy Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and other donors in staking The City to its $8.5 million in startup capital. Individual philanthropic donations from local civic and business leaders, such as Richard Ravitch, Rob Speyer, and Luis Miranda, signaled the potential for broader involvement from corporate sponsors and high-net-worth people. Since the organization’s launch in April, it has raised an additional $1.5 million from foundation, individual, and corporate donors.

Imagine if every foundation devoted just 1 percent of its grant making to build nonprofit local journalism in this way. If we extrapolate from the Foundation Center’s best estimates of US foundation giving in 2015, that would total about $620 million per year—well short of the $35 billion decline in news-industry revenue in recent years. But it is sufficient, if used smartly as venture capital, to seed nonprofit news organizations that can eventually restore the news ecosystem that has been lost.
Some of our nation’s best philanthropic efforts have built great institutions, such as libraries, hospitals, and parks. Foundations can do the same for news. Whether a philanthropy’s core interest is the arts, social justice, education, housing, or science, its concerns will only thrive in communities where basic information needs are served.

**News consumers** | Second, readers, viewers, and users must recognize that “nonprofit” does not mean “free.” Covering the news costs money, whether the publisher’s motive is civic or commercial. The Pew Research Center found that fewer than 15 percent of respondents to its poll had paid or given money to any local news outlet in 2018. When people tell me they love *The City* and read it every day, I explain that great local journalism requires great reporters and editors who should be paid decently for their service. I encourage them to become members of the organization—by donating as little or as much as they can. For $5 per month, the price of a latte, anyone can stake a claim to supporting this vital public service as a charitable contribution. A $5-per-month commitment from 20,000 New Yorkers would cover more than a quarter of *The City’s* current budget. Its formal membership campaign will launch in late 2019, six months after the site’s launch, to give readers enough time to determine its value. And we’re feeling optimistic—a simple “donate” button on the site has already yielded more than 600 members and generated more than $100,000 in revenue.

**Journalists and media organizations** | Third, journalists and news companies should moderate some of their competitive zeal. Their passion and drive are wonderful, but so is cooperation. In fact, a partnership with a commercial enterprise gave us the confidence to launch *The City* in early April. That commercial publisher, New York Media (NYM), the parent company of New York magazine, provided *The City* with essential support, including computer systems, graphic design, and digital distribution. NYM saw *The City* as a natural, local complement to its national perspective, and *The City* saw an extraordinary opportunity to springboard from NYM’s award-winning digital savvy and design expertise.

NYM has invested heavily in journalism of national scope, especially in coverage of Washington and Hollywood and in digital media, and has succeeded. But it sees the decline of local journalism as a problem for the industry and its own readership, and was eager to turn the tide. “When we saw the opportunity to provide support for a nonprofit journalism institution, one buffeted from the pressures of the digital advertising business, we jumped at the chance,” NYM’s editor-in-chief, David Haskell, says. “Pam [Wasserstein, chair and CEO of NYM] and Adam [Moss, former editor-in-chief of NYM] and I each considered it an honor to help. And we knew it would be a gift to our readers as well, to be able to point them to the work of our friends and hopefully, in the near future, showcase journalism created in partnership between the two institutions.”

*The City* is seeking further partnerships that enable news organizations to focus on their strengths, following the sage advice of Jeff Jarvis, professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, that in this era of strained budgets, newsrooms should do what they do best and link to the rest. *The City* has republished its articles in commercial outlets such as *The Queens Courier*, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and *NBC New York*, and in nonprofit venues such as WNET/MetroFocus and WNYC, and its articles have been linked by dozens of community news sites, both nonprofit and for-profit. In turn, *The City* has republished reporting from other organizations, such as work on criminal justice from The Marshall Project and on education from Chalkbeat. *The City*’s reporters have also been regular guests on WNYC, and the public radio station also cohosted with *The City* a debate among candidates for Queens district attorney. Given the expense of local news and the loss of advertising revenue, no one publication can do it alone—a healthy news ecosystem requires a variety of voices partnering to report on a city as vast and as diverse as New York—from hyperlocal sites like the *West Side Rag*, Bklyner, and the *Norwood News* to borough-based operations and citywide outlets—for-profit and nonprofit alike.

Many other exciting journalistic partnerships are happening around the country, each reflective of its own community and journalistic assets. They include the Colorado Media Project, Resolve Philadelphia, the Texas Public Records Purchase, and the Detroit Journalism Cooperative. Each collaborative draws on the unique capacities and creativity of its own local news ecosystems to make the most of limited resources.

Journalistic organizations should also look beyond their own industry partners to the communities they serve. *The City* has just launched the Open Newsroom, a partnership with the Brooklyn Public Library, a trusted community institution whose mission of welcoming anyone and everyone to be well informed meshes with *The City*’s own mission. Open Newsroom will convene community meetings four times per year in each of six branch libraries to better understand how information finds its way into and through a community and to explore how to make the news, like branch libraries, an information source that reflects the communities it serves. The program launched with six sessions in three library branches this past summer, drawing hundreds of people who shared, among other things, how and where they get their news—and what news means to them.

**Government** | Fourth, government can support local journalism without violating journalistic independence and freedom of the press. The most obvious example is the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Created by an act of Congress in 1967, CPB
channels federal funding to more than 1,500 locally owned public radio and television stations.

But more recent actions highlight new possibilities. Last year, for example, New Jersey committed to dedicating millions of dollars from the sale of two public television licenses to establish a nonprofit news incubator called the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium. The legislature and Governor Phil Murphy initially agreed to $5 million but, because of budgetary issues, have dedicated only up to $2 million. And in May 2019, Mayor de Blasio issued an executive order requiring that “all agencies of the City of New York shall ensure that, by the end of fiscal year 2020, and for every fiscal year thereafter, at least 50 percent of their annual print and digital publication advertising spending is going toward community and ethnic media outlets.” In an annual media advertising budget ranging from $10 million to $20 million, a multimillion-dollar infusion of ad buys for local, community, and ethnic media will not only target communities that can benefit most from the ads but also help create sustainable community news operations—assuming the money is distributed reliably, without favoritism.

Another novel idea surfaced this past July in a white paper by a committee of academic experts led by Guy Rønkin, a professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. It recommends public funding for legitimate journalistic organizations by allowing the IRS to enable every tax filer, via an income tax checkoff, to donate $50 to a favorite news outlet, with potential preferential treatment of local news. Although such an initiative could cost the federal government $13 billion annually, similar programs of tax-funded vouchers have been tried for campaign finance contributions. The mechanism here is clear; the question is whether the political will to try it exists.

Digital platforms | Finally, we should address the profiteering of digital media companies at the expense of news organizations. I suggest as a model the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). Enacted by Congress in 1977, CRA was a much-needed response to massive disinvestment and redlining by banks in urban neighborhoods across the country. The market had failed in these communities, and CRA required banks receiving deposits from those communities to reinvest in them. CRA investments have played a central role in the rebuilding of once-hollowed-out communities, and have also contributed to banking balance sheets.

Today we face a similar problem of disinvestment in the community through digital platforms taking advertising dollars away from local news outfits. According to a recent study by the News Media Alliance, Google’s revenue from news content on Google Search and Google News is estimated at $4.7 billion. Moreover, a recent article in Nieman Lab reports that Facebook is a “server of information to two-thirds of American adults, and 50 percent of its users want to see more local news.” Google and Facebook do not produce local news content but profit mightily from it through digital ad revenue and through their users’ freely sharing that content produced by others. A CRA for local journalism would divert a slice of digital platform profits to invest in local news content creators.

Our nation’s great nonprofit institutions rely on a mix of public, private, and charitable funding. We need to be creative about ways to use public funding to encourage all types of investment in local journalism. Revenue promiscuity will go a long way toward maintaining editorial independence—the more revenue sources, the less reliant an organization is on any one source, including public sources.

**TAKING RESPONSIBILITY**

Still in its infancy, *The City* has enjoyed a promising launch. Its journalists broke a significant number of important local stories in their first three months. For example, they revealed that at least a dozen workers had been killed on the job in New York’s booming construction business, yet only one of those deaths was properly reported to city agencies. To compound the problem, New York City and federal safety officials had different counts of the deaths. *The City*’s reporters also raised questions about the bidding process for a new ferry service, drawing the attention of the city comptroller and city council. They aggressively pursued the conflicts of interest in the mayor’s fundraising. And, yes, they got that light restored at the corner of Fulton and Adelphi.

But their job is never-ending. Soon after emptying the women’s solitary unit at Rikers because of Layleen Polanco’s death, the NYC Department of Corrections quietly reopened it, placing eight women detainees in punitive solitary confinement. We know this because *The City* reported the reopening.

Despite such important work, *The City’s* long-term success is far from assured. In sharing a bit of what we have learned so far, I hope to encourage others who are taking the same risks in communities across the country or are considering it. We need you to do it. So far, nonprofit news organizations are nowhere close to restoring the number of reporters or the amount of news coverage that newspapers have slashed. But rays of hope exist. The Knight Foundation’s $500 million commitment to local journalism has spurred new initiatives, such as the American Journalism Project—a venture philanthropy nonprofit for local news—and Report for America, which places young talent in local news rooms. Knight Foundation and the Democracy Fund are also supporting organizations that are helping to build a more robust ecosystem for nonprofit local news, including the News Revenue Hub, the Institute for Nonprofit News, and NewsMatch.

Every community deserves news organizations looking out for it. What Jane Jacobs called the “first fundamental of successful city life” is still true: “People must take a modicum of responsibility for each other.” Our job is to put more eyes back upon the streets.

**Notes**

1. See Penelope Muse Abernathy, “The Expanding News Desert,” *The Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018*.