Public Broadcasting Requests $175 million in Emergency Funding Relief

The economic toll of the virus on our nation’s public media system has been devastating. We estimate that the public broadcasting system will lose at least $400 million in FY 2020 and FY 2021. These losses come from declines in individual giving and state funding (37 States provide funding for public media).

These losses come at a time when public broadcasting resources and services have been more important than ever. Public television stations in all 50 states significantly increased their educational services during the pandemic to ensure that all students, regardless of access to broadband, had access to high-quality, curriculum-aligned learning resources.

Stations also ensured that the public had access to local health updates, often serving as the pool reporters for other news media in their states and offering live call-in shows with local health experts to connect the public with trusted, essential information when they needed it most.

All these additional services were unplanned and unbudgeted when the pandemic began, and these new responsibilities were shouldered by stations whose federal funding had not increased for ten years.

Public television stations have been honored to rise to these challenges, but without further additional emergency funding, these services, which their communities have come to rely upon, are at risk.

Public broadcasting greatly appreciates the $75 million in emergency funding that was provided in the CARES Act. This funding helped stabilize stations at a very difficult time. However, it is estimated that the system will lose at least $400 million between FY 2020 and FY 2021, and without additional funding soon, stations will be faced with very difficult decisions about what local services they will need to cut.

Expanded Public Television Services During the Pandemic

Below are examples of the types of services stations have added to meet community needs during the pandemic:

Public television reaches nearly 97% of American households via over-the-air broadcast, providing critical education resources for students without internet access or adequate access to internet devices.

- In all 50 States, a new At-Home Learning broadcast schedule for grades (K-12) was provided over-the-air, delivering critical educational content to all households, regardless of internet access. In the majority of states, the At-Home Learning programming is localized and curated.

- In at least 28 states, stations partnered with their Local Educational Authority or State Educational Authority to provide essential education resources. And in at least 12 States, stations broadcast instructional content from teachers, bringing all students a classroom experience, regardless of internet access.
Some local stations are using datacasting to address the “homework gap,” employing their broadcast spectrum to deliver digital education content to students who do not have broadband, closely mimicking the internet experience.

- South Carolina ETV partnered with the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) to use datacasting to send education content to the homes of students who do not have access to broadband. South Carolina ETV was able to quickly start datacasting, in just two weeks, and has been working with SCDE to roll out receivers to students.

- Stations in IN, PA, SD and KY are moving forward to provide these services to households without broadband access, and similar partnerships are being explored by stations throughout the country in collaboration with their local education partners.

Users of PBS LearningMedia has grown by over 240% during the pandemic. This free online collection of standards-based, curriculum-aligned interactive digital learning objects, lesson plans and other resources is playing an important role in supporting teachers’ and homeschoolers’ educational workplans.

Most stations have expanded their public safety services by providing frequent health briefings.

- In many cases, public broadcasting stations have served as pool reporters for media throughout their state – setting up the infrastructure to carry the daily briefings and ensuring that official information was available to all who needed it.

- Stations have also connected their communities with local health experts to address the most pressing issues of the pandemic and help keep the community safe -- including helping communities better understand the science and helping spread the word about the importance of vaccinations and where, when and how to receive those vaccinations.

Past Economic Crisis Impacts on Public Broadcasting:

As with the great recession of 2007-2008, when the public broadcasting system lost $90 million in state funding, public media anticipate that additional cuts in non-federal funding are likely in coming years, especially in funding from the 37 States that support the work of public broadcasting.

Conclusion

To ensure that local public media stations weather the pandemic-created economic storm, public broadcasting is requesting an additional $175 million in emergency relief funding to ensure the continuity of essential public services that educate, inform and protect the American people.