

MTFP

MONTANA FREE PRESS

Annual Report 2026



Letter from the Board



Dear Friends,

As Board Chair of the Montana Free Press, I spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the future of our independent, award-winning, nonprofit news organization. It is, after all, the Board's job to help guide MTFP and ensure its sustainable growth.

As much as we look forward, however, certain milestones require us to pause and peek into the rearview. Ten years is one of them—especially when you consider how far MTFP has come. I still remember when this whole thing was just a former colleague's long-shot idea. News coverage in the state was shrinking, with big corporations gutting staff and small community outfits closing up shop. My friend thought he had the solution: an independent, nonprofit newsroom that would speak truth to power from Helena to Hardin, Bozeman to Billings. He envisioned basic boots-on-the-ground community journalism; in-depth investigative pieces; vital, nonpartisan tools to inform voters; and a business plan that allowed for competitive wages and responsible growth. Oh, and it'd be free.

Like I said, long shot.

Today, MTFP has a staff of 25 employees and an award-winning newsroom that covers the entire state. Those ambitious ideas? Checked off, one by one by one, with newer, grander ideas emerging all the time so that our coverage evolves as Montana does. In addition to building a stronger news organization for Montana, MTFP mentors other nonprofit newsrooms across the country.

> **Montana Free Press is needed now more than ever. Thank you for your commitment to the truth, for your unbiased reporting, for keeping true to your profession.**
>
> **— Lonie S., Great Falls**

We've gone from long shot to industry standard.

This anniversary also marks an important transition. After a decade of building and leading MTFP, founder and CEO John Adams has announced that he will step down on June 1. It's hard to overstate what John's vision, determination and leadership have meant to this organization and to journalism in Montana. But perhaps his greatest accomplishment is building something that will endure beyond his tenure: a talented team, a sustainable organization and a mission that is as important today as it was when MTFP began. The Board is deeply grateful for John's leadership and excited about the opportunities ahead.

Clearly, I'm proud of what MTFP has accomplished. Underdog stories like this take guts, failure and perseverance. Like a lot of Montana successes, I think our story is as much about where we are now—and where we're headed—as it is about where and why we started.

As MTFP's longest-serving Board member, I'm especially proud of its history. I promise to keep the history close, even as my fellow Board members and I stay steadfastly focused on an equally bright future.

With deep gratitude,

Skylar Browning
Chair, Board of Directors

MONTANA MTFP FREE PRESS

Reporting rooted in Montana communities

Closer to the communities we serve

The issues shaping Montana look different in Great Falls than they do in Missoula, Helena or Billings. MTFP is building a model that puts reporters closer to the communities they cover — giving readers reliable local information while connecting those stories to the statewide forces behind them.

MTFP LOCAL

Context before Helena voters decide

Our coverage helped readers understand the stakes of major school bond proposals before voters approved one of the largest school bonds in state history.



Housing from the neighborhood up in Missoula

MTFP is following how tenants are organizing around housing affordability and what those efforts mean for residents, landlords and local policy.



Accountability with consequences in Great Falls

After months of reporting and reviewing extensive medical records, MTFP exposed serious concerns about patient selection and oversight within Benefis Health System's heart valve replacement program. Following publication, Benefis removed promotional content praising the physician who had led the program, but did not explain why.

A new local lens in Billings

Our newest MTFP Local branch in Billings is already helping residents understand important decisions about schools, courts and other institutions shaping daily life.

MOUNTAIN JOURNAL

Deeper coverage of the Greater Yellowstone region

In 2026, Mountain Journal expanded its reporting capacity through collaborations with Ellis Juhlin and Nick Mott, with Grist, High Country News and Report for America. Juhlin is dedicated to covering climate change and its effects on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and Montana. Mott reports on public lands, wildlife, water and rural communities across the region.

Together, they give readers sustained coverage of consequential environmental issues that few newsrooms have the capacity to follow closely.



From Montana idea to national movement

A Montana idea reaches all 50 states

On April 9, Montana Free Press helped turn an idea about the value of local news into a national day of action.

MTFP was a founding partner of the inaugural **Local News Day**, created to help people find, use and support trusted local news and information in their communities. Newsrooms, nonprofits, businesses, universities and civic organizations were invited to participate in whatever way made sense locally – from public events and membership drives to newsroom open houses and digital campaigns.

1,682 participating organizations across all 50 states and Washington, D.C.

26,053 new subscribers and followers reported during the campaign week

76,255 Local News Day website visitors

13,739 unique visitors to the Local News Finder

867 articles generated



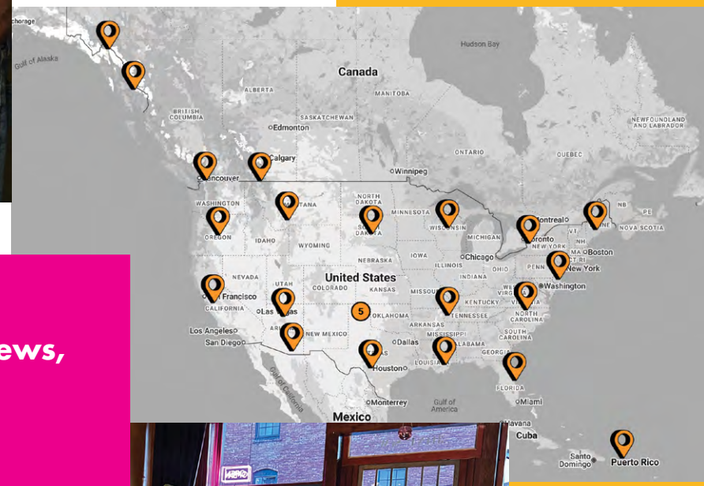


Why it matters for MTFP

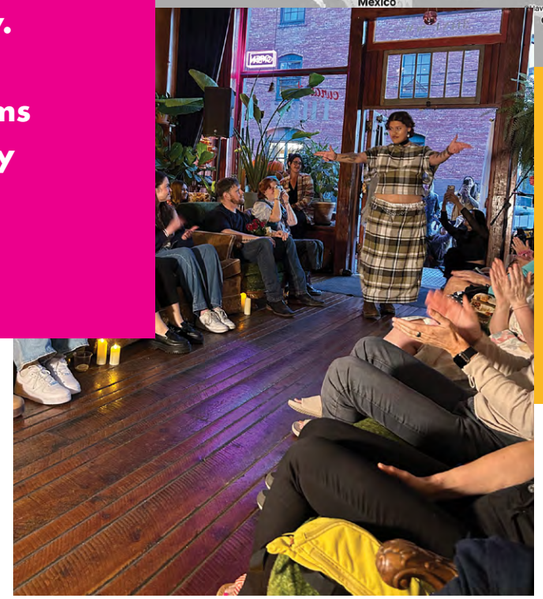
Local News Day reflects something larger about Montana Free Press at 10: a newsroom built to serve this state is increasingly helping shape solutions for the wider local-news field. MTFP brought Montana experience, relationships and leadership to a coalition that included national philanthropic, technology and news organizations.For MTFP supporters, that reach represents something important: ideas tested and built in Montana are helping strengthen access to trusted local information across the country.

MTFP has moved from beneficiary of innovation in nonprofit news to contributor and convenor.





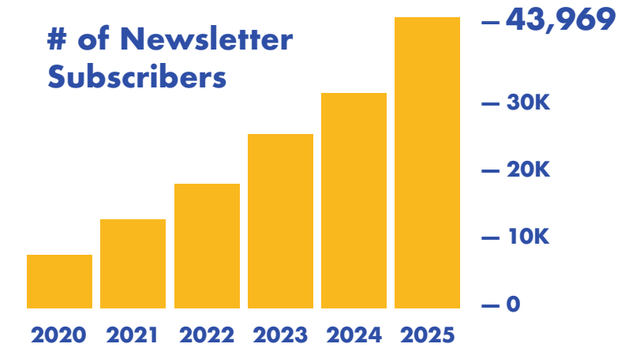
> **As one partner, Rebuild Local News, put it: "It was a transformative moment of collective solidarity. Seeing the range of nuanced stories from varying newsrooms and organizations on how they contribute to the local news ecosystem was invigorating."**



Ten years of showing up for Montana

In 2016, Montana Free Press began as a one-person newsroom. Ten years later, MTFP has grown into a statewide public-service news organization with reporters and editors covering the Capitol, Montana communities, health care, education, elections, the environment, public lands and the Greater Yellowstone region.

That growth has always had a purpose: to give Montanans more of the independent, fact-based information they need to understand what is happening around them. Donor support made each step possible.



Monthly Stats (average)

421K
Page Views

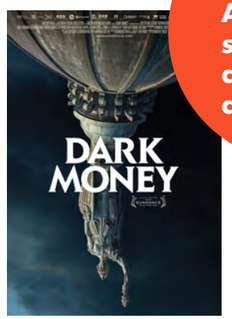
189K
Unique Visitors

2016
MTFP launches

John Adams establishes Montana Free Press under the fiscal sponsorship of the Institute for Nonprofit News.

2018
A Montana story reaches a national audience

Sundance Film Festival



Dark Money, featuring MTFP's founding, premieres at Sundance, later airs on PBS and receives national recognition.

2019
From one reporter to a newsroom

MTFP adds its first editor and reporter and, for the first time, covers the Montana Legislature as a team.



2020
Information when Montanans need it most



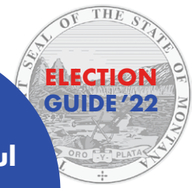
The COVID-19 data tracker becomes a widely used public resource as MTFP adds reporting and business capacity.

2021
Statehouse reporting reaches more Montanans

The Session launches with Montana Public Radio and Yellowstone Public Radio, expanding access to legislative coverage.

2022
Building useful products and a stronger organization

The Election Guide earns national product recognition and MTFP receives **LION Publishers awards** for business strength and resilience.



2023
Reporting gets closer to home

MTFP Local launches, expanding sustained community reporting. Membership passes 4,000.

2024
Mountain Journal joins MTFP

MOUNTAIN JOURNAL

The acquisition strengthens reporting on public lands, wildlife, water and the Greater Yellowstone region.

2025
Reporting earns record recognition

MTFP receives a record number of statewide journalism honors.

- 1st place, Society of Professional Journalists NW Excellence in Journalism Contest, for Racial Equity Reporting (Medium)
- Montana Better Newspaper Contest: Division 4, 1st Place for Best News Story

2026
A decade in, built for what comes next

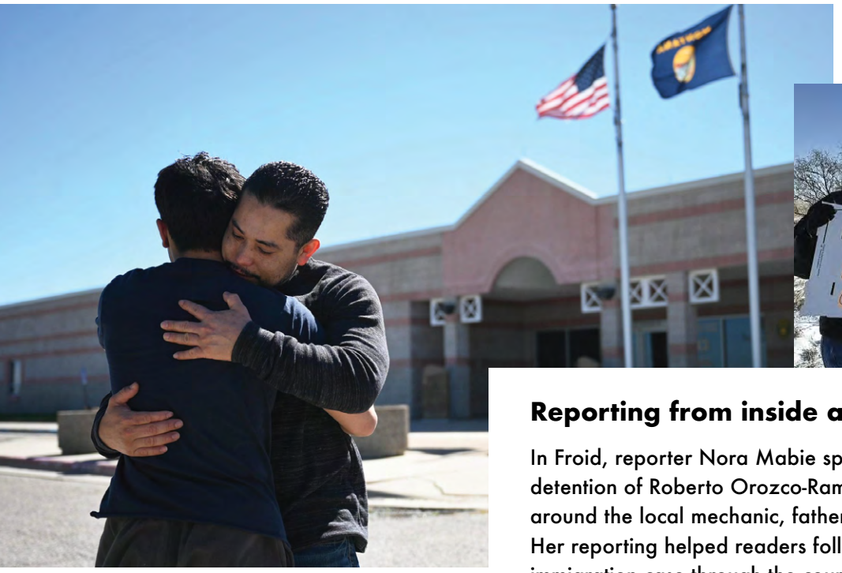
More than a dozen MTFP reporters and editors now serve Montana, supported by readers, members, donors, and partners who believe reliable local information should be available to everyone.

As MTFP celebrates 10 years, founder and CEO John Adams announces plans to step down on June 1, 2027, marking a new chapter for the organization he launched in 2016.

Reporting that changes what people know

Reporting that helps Montanans understand what is at stake

Reach matters. But the true impact of MTFP's work becomes clear when reporters have the time, expertise and community trust to follow important stories wherever they lead.





Reporting from inside a rural community

In Froid, reporter Nora Mabie spent months following the detention of Roberto Orozco-Ramirez as neighbors rallied around the local mechanic, father and Little League coach. Her reporting helped readers follow a complicated federal immigration case through the courts while showing how national policy decisions were affecting one small Montana town.

The depth of the coverage depended on something that cannot be created overnight: trust built through careful, sustained reporting. Support from the Pulitzer Center helped make this reporting possible.

MTFP by the Numbers

48,012 Email Subscribers

211,678 Average Unique Monthly Website Visitors

4,788 Donating Members

Republications:

4,270 Online Outlets

158 Print Outlets

533 Stories Published by Full-time Reporters

> **Your excellent reporting identifies issues of which I've been unaware and provides background about the complexities so I can appreciate the importance of each story.**
>
> **— Virginia G., Fort Benton**

Reporter residencies fueling local newsrooms

Montana Free Press' Reporter Residency program gives our journalists the opportunity to spend time in communities across the state and learn alongside the local reporters who serve them every day.

In August, MTFP reporter Zeke Lloyd traveled nearly 400 miles from Helena to Glendive for a week at the Glendive Ranger-Review. There, he found the same commitment that drives our newsroom: journalists calling sources, poring over public records and working tirelessly to separate fact from fiction.

Your support makes these residencies possible, helping MTFP reporters build stronger relationships with Montana communities and local newsrooms while bringing fresh perspectives to their statewide reporting.

REPORTER RESIDENCY
MTFP MONTANA FREE PRESS

> **We're so lucky to have Montana Free Press covering the important and far-reaching events happening in our state.**
>
> **— Carol B., Great Falls**

Following the decisions that will shape a place for decades

In northwest Montana, MTFP reporter Amanda Eggert reported on a nearly $58 million cleanup agreement for the former Columbia Falls Aluminum Corporation site, explaining the future of one of the region's largest industrial legacies.





Making a new industry understandable before decisions are final

In Bonner, MTFP Local reporter Katie Fairbanks has tracked a proposed data center and the questions surrounding water, power, noise and environmental impacts. The reporting gives residents usable information while local officials consider rules for an industry new to many Montana communities.

Recognition Earned

Independent judges continued to recognize the quality and rigor of MTFP reporting.



LION COMMUNITY MEMBER OF THE YEAR
John Adams

BEST NEWS STORY
1st Place

BEST EDUCATION COVERAGE
3rd Place

BEST CONTINUING NEW COVERAGE
3rd Place

FEDERAL IMPACT REPORTING
3rd Place

Montana Newspaper Association
2025 Better Newspaper Contest
DIVISION 5

Society of Professional Journalists
2025 Excellence in Journalism Awards
WRITING, MEDIUM NEWSROOM DIVISION

Recognition that matters most: yours

Every story in this report is connected to someone who chose to make it possible.

Reader contributions give MTFP the independence to follow stories wherever they lead, the resources to invest in talented reporters and editors and the ability to keep our journalism accessible to everyone.

We are deeply grateful to the people who have made that commitment year after year — and to those investing in MTFP for the first time. Special Thanks to our Founder's Circle and Major Donors.

FOUNDER'S CIRCLE

Noreen & Roger Breeding
Gary & Norma Buchanan
Linda Caricaburu & Brad Talcott
Lisa & Tom Cordingley
Paul Foster
Travis Kavulla
Sandra Lambert
Rock Ringling
Ron & Ann Waterman

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Adele Nguyen
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Margaret Parodi
Rebecca Patton
Mark Payne & Nan Bradenberger-Payne
Margaret Perryman
Ellsworth and Carla Peterson Charitable Foundation
James Peterson
Trudi Bishop Peterson
Lawrence Pettit
Carin Phillips
Caroline & Will Price
Anne Marie Quinn
Mary Lee Reese
Henry Reich & Hannah Specht
Rosenthal Family Foundation
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Sanders Family Fund
Richard and Mary Seitz
Jon Sesso
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Maria & Peter van Loben Sels
Mary & Roger Vanbuskirk
Angus Vaughan
May Vaughan
Winnie Vaughan
Jonathan Walther
Warsh-Mott Funds
Sas & Stuart Weber
Jay Wells
Arianna Whitman
Bridget Wilkinson
Burt Williams & Joan Brownell
Elizabeth Wood

"We find your coverage pertinent to what is important in our everyday lives. The writing is topnotch. We appreciate MTFP for the outstanding journalistic content. Thank you."
— Debra J., Ulm

"I appreciate your Montana Coverage. We relied on your candidate coverage to make an informed decision about the election."
— Dan O., Butte

"[MTFP is the] best local independent news organization in Montana."
— Steve N., Lakeside

"We're so lucky to have Montana Free Press covering the important and far-reaching events happening in our state. Keep up the good work!"
— Carol B., Great Falls

"MTFP follows and reports on issues that matter to me. I can count on thorough reporting that demystifies complicated topics."
— Dani H., Helena



Ten years of trusted news for Montana — and the people who make it possible.

MONTANA MTFP FREE PRESS

Our mission is to produce in-depth public-service journalism that creates positive change and helps move society toward justice and equity.

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