

STAYING STRONG:

A Resilience Playbook for Local Public Media Organizations

A Supportive Guide for Local Station Leaders Navigating the Loss of CPB Funding

Introduction

The elimination of public media federal funding is no longer a future threat - it's a present reality. Local public media organizations, particularly in rural, under-resourced, and high-need communities, are now facing an urgent challenge: how to continue serving the public while rapidly adjusting to the loss of a major source of operational funding.

This playbook is meant to provide structure in a time of disruption. It won't solve every problem, but it can help you take the next step with more confidence - and without feeling alone. We've also included tools and templates you can adapt, so you don't have to start from scratch.

How to Use This Guide

Think of this as a flexible roadmap, not a checklist. It's organized around ten key steps you can take to stabilize your station, focus on your mission, and begin to rebuild. You don't need to do them all at once. Start where you are. Skip ahead if needed. Come back as

things evolve. Each step includes: what it's for, what to focus on, and tools and templates to make things easier.

Steps to Follow

1. Bring the right people together
2. Prioritize staff wellbeing
3. Get clear on your financial picture
4. Focus on what matters most
5. Build a short-term emergency budget
6. Realign your people and resources
7. Reaffirm your mission
8. Secure financial support
9. Consider collaborating and partnerships
10. Plan for what's next

Step 1: Bring the Right People Together

In a moment like this, it's easy to feel pulled in every direction or to get stuck waiting for perfect answers before acting. A dedicated response team creates a clear hub for decisions and communication, prevents burnout by spreading the responsibility, and ensures your board/license holder, staff, and community see consistent leadership - even as things change quickly.

What this step is for: To quickly pull together a small, focused group of leaders who can make decisions, share the workload, and keep your station organized and moving forward through the uncertainty.

What to focus on:

- **Keep the group small and focused**
 - Aim for 4–5 core members:
 - General Manager/President/CEO (leads and coordinates)
 - Finance lead (tracks cash, budgets, and runway)
 - Content or news lead (ensures core services keep going)
 - Operations lead (if a dedicated person) (staffing, policies, logistics)
 - And potentially a board member/license holder representative (decision-making support, fundraising help)
 - Others (engineering, development) can be looped in as needed.
- **Set a consistent rhythm**
 - Meet daily or every other day for the first few weeks, then taper as things stabilize.
 - Keep meetings short (could be as short as 15 minutes) and focused on decisions, not discussion.
 - Use a shared dashboard or notes document so everyone has the same information between meetings.
- **Clarify roles and decision-making**
 - Decide who makes which calls (e.g., GM for operational decisions, board chair/license holder for major financial approvals).

- Agree on what requires sign-off by the full board/license holder versus what this team can handle.
- Designate a point person for internal communication (to staff) and one for external communication (to donors, partners, and the public).
- **Keep the whole organization connected**
 - Use this group to coordinate updates for staff, board/license holder, and community, so people hear consistent information.
 - Make sure team members check in with their respective areas (newsroom, production, finance, operations) so everyone stays aligned.
- **Stay flexible and supportive**
 - Be prepared to adjust the team or meeting schedule as circumstances change.
 - Check in on each other - leading through crisis is demanding, and your leadership team needs support, too.

Friendly reminder: This team's job isn't to solve everything at once - it's to keep things moving, decisions clear, and communication consistent so your station can adapt without chaos or confusion.

Helpful tools:

- [RAPID Decision Making](#) (Bridgespan Group)
 - [Team Roles & Decision Matrix Template](#) (Google Doc)
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Step 2: Prioritize Staff Wellbeing

In any crisis, your team is the foundation of your ability to serve the community. The uncertainty and stress that come with funding cuts can take a heavy toll - and if left unaddressed, morale, trust, and productivity can quickly erode. Prioritizing your staff's well-being isn't just the right thing to do; it helps your organization remain resilient and better equipped to weather the storm.

What this step is for: To help your team feel supported, valued, and grounded during a difficult time - so they can stay engaged, resilient, and able to continue serving the community alongside you.

What to focus on:

- **Lead with empathy and transparency**
 - Acknowledge the challenges openly. Let staff know what you know - and what you don't - so they're not left guessing.
 - Share updates regularly, even if the message is "we're still working through this." Consistency builds trust.
- **Offer resources and flexibility**
 - Connect staff with available resources, such as employee assistance programs, counseling options, or mental health hotlines.
 - When possible, offer flexible schedules, remote work options, or wellness days to help reduce stress.
- **Foster a sense of community and belonging**
 - Keep teams connected through regular check-ins, team huddles, or even informal "coffee chats."
 - Recognize and celebrate contributions, even small ones, to help keep spirits up.
- **Involve staff in problem-solving**
 - Invite team members to contribute ideas for cost-saving, fundraising, or service adjustments.
 - Empower people by giving them a voice in shaping solutions - this builds engagement and trust.

- **Recognize warning signs early**

- Be alert for signs of burnout, disengagement, or conflict.
- Provide support before stress becomes overwhelming, whether through workload adjustments or additional resources.

Friendly reminder: When staff feel seen, supported, and included, they're more likely to stick with the organization through tough times. Resilient teams - not just balanced budgets - are what keep stations alive and thriving.

Helpful tools:

- [Staff Wellbeing Toolkit](#) (Google Doc)
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Step 3: Get Clear on Your Financial Picture

Before making any big decisions, it's important to get a clear picture of where things stand. With CPB funding gone, your previous financial plan no longer reflects reality. Until you know exactly how much cash you have and how long it will last, it's hard to decide what to cut, what to protect, or how urgently to raise new funds. Getting clear on your cash situation gives you the foundation to act with confidence and keep your board/license holder, staff, and funders aligned.

What this step is for: To help you quickly understand how much cash your station has, how long it can last, and what your near-term revenues and expenses really look like - so you can make decisions based on facts, not assumptions.

What to focus on

- **Calculate cash on hand and reserves**
 - Add up what's in your operating accounts and any unrestricted reserves.
 - Separate out restricted funds (grants or donations earmarked for specific uses) so you know what's truly available.
 - Factor in any credit lines or loans - but don't count them as cash until you know you can draw on them.
- **Estimate your runway (how long you can operate)**
 - Take your total available cash and divide by your average monthly expenses.
 - This gives you a rough "months of runway" figure.
- **Map out your next 90 days**
 - List all major revenues you expect (giving, sponsorship, grants, etc.).
 - List all major expenses and obligations (payroll, tower leases, insurance, debt, production costs, etc.).
 - Identify any large or unusual bills that could be deferred, renegotiated, or split into payments.
- **Spot the pressure points**
 - Are there months where cash drops dangerously low?
 - Are there fixed costs that eat up a disproportionate share of your budget?

- Use these insights to guide immediate decisions on spending freezes, fundraising, or renegotiations.
- **Share the picture with your leadership and board/license holder**
 - Present your cash flow and runway clearly - no jargon, just a simple visual.
 - Use it to start conversations about immediate adjustments (spending cuts, revenue pushes) and to build urgency for donor and funder outreach.
- **Keep it updated**
 - Revisit your cash flow every 2–4 weeks.
 - Adjust your projections as new giving, underwriting, grants, or expenses come in - and use the updated picture to drive decisions.

Friendly reminder: You don't need to have every number perfect - just get a working picture of what you're dealing with so you can start making grounded choices.

Helpful tools:

- [Cash Flow Estimator](#) (Google Sheet)
 - Webinar: Managing Nonprofit Finances During a Crisis ([recording](#) and [slides](#))
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Step 4: Focus on What Matters Most

When funding disappears, the instinct can be to try to hold everything together. But spreading your resources too thin can weaken the very work your community depends on. By focusing on your “core” - the things that deliver the greatest value and impact - you can keep serving in a meaningful way, even with fewer resources.

What this step is for: To help you zero in on the services, programs, and roles your community needs most - so you can protect what’s essential and make choices about where to scale back or simplify.

What to focus on:

- **Ask the big questions**
 - If our station could only do three things right now, what would they be?
 - What would our community lose if we stopped this program or service?
 - What do we do that no one else in our area can provide?
- **Look to your community for guidance**
 - Use local data and insights to see what people value most:
 - Audience and membership trends (what content and services people are engaging with)
 - Community needs assessments (e.g., civic engagement, emergency alerts, education)
 - Feedback from surveys, listening sessions, or community partners
 - This isn’t just about what’s most popular — it’s about what’s most vital.
- **Score or rank your services and programs**
 - Use a simple scoring tool (like a 1–5 scale) across these criteria:
 - Mission alignment – Does this fulfill your core purpose?
 - Community need – Is it meeting an urgent or unique local need?
 - Cost vs. benefit – Does it deliver enough impact for the resources it requires?
 - Reach and engagement – Who and how many does it serve?

- High scores indicate what's most important to protect. Lower scores might be candidates for pausing, simplifying, or partnering.
- **Clarify the “non-negotiables”**
 - These are the services or programs you will do everything possible to maintain - like local news, emergency alerts, or essential educational programming.
 - Make sure your team, board/license holder, and community know these priorities.

Friendly reminder: Focusing on what matters most isn't just about cutting - it's about concentrating your energy, people, and resources on the work that truly makes a difference.

Helpful tools:

- [Services Strategy Map](#) (Bridgespan Group)
 - Webinar: Resilience in Uncertain Times
([recording](#) and [slides](#))
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Step 5: Build a Short-Term Emergency Budget

Your old budget assumed CPB funding and a steadier financial landscape. Trying to patch it together can hide the real gaps and delay hard choices. A fresh, short-term emergency budget helps you see where you stand clearly, prioritize essential spending, and give your board, staff, and funders a realistic plan they can rally around.

What this step is for: To help your station create a simplified, realistic budget that reflects your current reality - so you can stabilize operations, focus on what matters most, and make decisions with confidence.

What to focus on:

- **Start from zero, not your old budget**
 - Remove all CPB revenue lines.
 - Rebuild your income and expense projections from scratch, based on what you know now (individual giving, underwriting, grants, cash on hand, etc.).
 - Avoid wishful thinking about revenue growth - keep assumptions conservative.
- **Prioritize essential expenses**
 - Fund the work your community depends on most: local news, emergency alerts, educational or cultural programming, critical operations.
 - Use your “core services” (from Step 4) as the foundation for where dollars should go first.
 - Rank all other expenses as essential, can scale down, or can pause.
- **Separate fixed and flexible costs**
 - Identify costs that are unavoidable (e.g., tower leases, core staff salaries, insurance).
 - Highlight what can be negotiated, deferred, outsourced, or shared (e.g., some tech, administrative, or production costs).
- **Build a 3–6 month outlook, not a full fiscal year**
 - Focus on the near-term so you can stay nimble and adjust as revenues or opportunities shift.
 - Consider making two versions:

- A “bare-bones survival” budget (minimum needed to keep the lights on and core services going).
- A “stabilized” budget (what you could support if new funding or partnerships come through).
- **Align it with your board/license holder and team**
 - Share the emergency budget with your board/license holder quickly for feedback and approval.
 - Walk staff through the big picture so they understand the “why” behind changes.
- **Revisit it often**
 - Update your budget and cash forecast every 30–60 days.
 - Adjust as revenues, expenses, or external factors change (e.g., fundraising success, new partnerships, or unexpected costs).

Friendly reminder: This isn’t forever. This budget just needs to get you through the next few months with clarity and control.

Helpful tools:

- Webinar: Budgeting & Forecasting for Public Media Leaders
([recording](#) and [slides](#))
 - Webinar: The Power of Forecasting: Navigating Financial Futures in Public Media
([recording](#) and [slides](#))
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Step 6: Realign Your People Resources

After clarifying your core services, your station can't operate as it did before. Roles, budgets, and resources need to shift to match your priorities. This is about reshaping the organization so it can deliver its essential work effectively, even with fewer resources.

What this step is for: To make sure your staff, budget, facilities, partnerships, and systems all work together to support the programs and services your community needs most - and to do so in a way that's adaptable, sustainable, and respectful to your team.

What to focus on:

- **Start with the work, not the people**
 - Map your essential services (from Step 4) and list what roles, skills, and tools are required to keep them running.
 - Build your staffing and resource plan around these needs first, so decisions feel anchored in mission and impact.
- **Look beyond staff to other resources**
 - Budget: Direct spending toward your top priorities, scaling back or pausing everything else.
 - Facilities: Can space be downsized or shared? Are there production or broadcast costs that can be reduced?
 - Technology and Tools: Focus on systems that directly support core services; delay upgrades that don't.
 - Partnerships: Collaborate with other stations or nonprofits to share costs or fill skill gaps.
- **Be flexible and willing to adapt**
 - Create plans that allow roles, schedules, and processes to shift as conditions change.
 - Revisit staffing and resource allocation every 60–90 days to keep your organization balanced.
- **Handle staff adjustments with care**

- Communicate openly about *why* changes are happening, how decisions are being made, and what supports are available.
- Explore alternatives before layoffs, such as voluntary reductions, role-sharing, temporary furloughs, or reassignments.
- Recognize the personal impact on staff, and provide empathy, clarity, and space for questions.

Friendly reminder: The goal isn't just to cut - it's to make sure every part of your organization, from your team to your tools, is working toward the same priorities. Done thoughtfully, this step helps your station remain nimble and capable while keeping trust and morale intact. Be as transparent and thoughtful as possible, even in difficult moments.

Helpful tools:

- [Staffing and Resource Alignment Planner](#) (Google Sheet)
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Step 7: Reaffirm Your Mission

In uncertain times, silence breeds anxiety and doubt. People want to know what's happening and why, even if all the answers aren't ready yet. Regular, clear communication helps maintain trust, while reaffirming your station's mission helps keep people inspired and supportive. Together, they show that your organization is adapting, not disappearing.

What this step is for: Keeping your team, board/license holder, donors, and community informed, reassured, and engaged.

What to focus on:

- **Start inside the organization**
 - Hold a staff meeting as soon as possible - even if you don't have every answer yet.
 - Be honest about the challenges, but also share what's being done and what's next.
 - Brief your board/license holder with a clear financial snapshot and the role you need them to play (fundraising, decision-making, advocacy). Also take the opportunity to remind them of the critical role that you play and how their ongoing support is critical
- **Bring donors, partners, and funders into the loop**
 - Share a calm, transparent update that explains how you're stabilizing and where their help can make a difference.
 - Ask for specific support (emergency gifts, introductions, advocacy).
- **Update your audience and community**
 - Issue a public message explaining what's changing, what isn't, and how your station will continue to serve.
 - Keep the tone grounded but hopeful: focus on your ongoing value, not just your challenges.
 - Make it clear how the community can support you — through donations, advocacy, or simply staying engaged.
- **Reaffirm your mission in every message**

- Remind people why your station exists: to inform, connect, and serve your community.
- Share examples of the impact you're still making, even as you adjust.
- Let your audience know that their support is helping preserve something essential for your community.

Friendly reminder: Even if you don't have all the answers, people appreciate honesty and direction. This isn't just survival. It's a chance to show your community what enduring service looks like.

Helpful tools:

- [Vision, Mission, Values: What They Are](#) (Google Doc)
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Step 8: Secure Financial Support

Cutting costs alone can only get you so far. To stay viable and continue serving your community, you'll need to generate new funding streams quickly. Fortunately, there are people and organizations - from local supporters to national foundations - who value what local public media provides. You just need to reach them with a clear, compelling case.

What this step is for: To help your station replace lost CPB revenue by tapping into community giving, strengthening relationships with major donors, and seeking new philanthropic support - so you can stabilize and sustain your most essential services. Your community and others beyond your community value your station. Many will be ready to step up if you show them how - and if you explain why it matters now more than ever.

What to focus on:

- **Start with your closest supporters**
 - Ask your board members and major donors for emergency bridge funding or multi-year pledges. Also ask your license holder
 - Keep these conversations personal and specific: explain the gap you're facing, what you're doing to adapt, and exactly how their gift will make a difference.
 - Invite them to help with outreach — introductions to other funders or community leaders can be as valuable as a gift.
- **Launch a community-driven campaign**
 - Roll out a public appeal that focuses on your station's local impact: "Help Keep Local Public Media Local."
 - Keep the message simple and urgent, but hopeful - this is about protecting service, not just avoiding cuts.
 - Use all channels (email, on-air, social, direct mail) and tell real stories of how your station helps the community stay informed, safe, and connected.
- **Identify potential philanthropic funders**
 - Look at local, regional, and national foundations that support journalism, civic engagement, education, rural development, or cultural programming.

- Use tools like foundation directories, your state nonprofit association, or Local News Catalyst's Funder Landscape to identify who is funding media and community information work.
- Start with funders who already support similar organizations or causes in your area.
- **Make the case for their support**
 - Frame your station as a community anchor providing trusted local information, especially where other news sources have vanished.
 - Emphasize your role in civic life and public safety (emergency alerts, voter information, educational programming).
 - Highlight your adaptation efforts: show that you're restructuring, cutting costs, and collaborating to remain viable.
 - Position your station as an opportunity for funders to preserve vital local infrastructure - not just a stopgap.
- **Pursue a mix of support types**
 - Emergency bridge grants to stabilize operations while you adapt.
 - Capacity-building grants to invest in shared services, technology, or sustainability planning.
 - Programmatic support tied to your strongest, most fundable initiatives (e.g., local news coverage, educational programming, rural community engagement).
- **Build relationships, not just transactions**
 - Treat funders and donors as partners. Share your plans, your progress, and your impact openly.
 - Invite them into the conversation about how your station can continue to meet community needs long-term.

Helpful tools:

- Explore your [funder landscape](#) to identify potential supporters
 - [Know your community](#) and [local news ecosystem](#) to build your case
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Step 9: Consider Collaboration and Partnerships

Losing CPB funding may mean that many stations can no longer sustain every function in-house. Some of the most expensive or specialized tasks - from engineering to IT to finance - can be done more affordably by pooling resources, outsourcing, or working with established partners. This isn't about giving up control. It's about lightening the load so that your station can keep its focus (and its dollars) on the work your community truly relies on - like local news, cultural programming, and other content and services.

Collaboration doesn't have to mean mergers or long-term commitments. Even small, flexible partnerships can save money and preserve service.

What this step is for: To help your station reduce costs, maintain essential functions, and free up staff time by working with others — whether that means partnering with peer stations, collaborating with nonprofits, or outsourcing certain services to trusted vendors.

What to focus on:

- **List the functions that are costly or hard to sustain internally**
 - Finance and accounting
 - Engineering and IT support
 - HR, payroll, or legal services
 - Content production or editing (audio, video, digital)
 - Editorial guidance or newsroom coaching
 - Underwriting sales or grant writing
 - Group purchasing (for software, supplies, or services)
- **Decide what can be outsourced or shared**
 - Outsource: Hire an external vendor or contractor who can provide the service at lower cost or greater efficiency.
 - Share: Split costs and staff with another station or nonprofit for a role, system, or program.

- In-Source: Find a partner station that does a task very efficiently; have them pick up that task for your station. And vice versa: Identify one thing you do very well, and offer to do it for your partner.
- Collaborate: Partner on content or editorial efforts (co-productions, pooled reporting, statewide coverage).
- **Find the right partners or providers**
 - Nearby stations or state networks
 - Nonprofits and community organizations
 - Specialist vendors that already work with small media outlets (for IT, accounting, HR)
 - Consortiums or public media service bureaus (some state networks or foundations offer group purchasing or shared staffing)
- **Start small, then scale**
 - Test one or two areas (for example, outsourcing IT support or sharing a grant writer) before committing to multiple functions.
 - Use a simple agreement or MOU for clarity on roles, costs, and responsibilities.
- **Keep your core identity intact**
 - Make sure any outsourcing or shared services arrangement supports your mission and keeps your station's local voice and community presence strong.
 - Regularly check in with staff and partners to make sure the arrangement is working for everyone.

Helpful tools:

- [Financial benchmarks: see how your revenue and expenses compare](#)
 - [Find strength in sharing: partnership and collaboration](#)
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Step 10: Plan for What's Next

Even after the immediate response, uncertainty will continue: individual giving may fluctuate, university or state funding may change, sponsorship may dip, FCC rules may change, or new opportunities may arise. By sketching out a few simple “what if” scenarios, you give your station a roadmap for different paths forward. This prevents reactive decision-making and helps your board, staff, and community feel more confident about the future.

What this step is for: To help your station look ahead and prepare for different possible futures — so you can make decisions with less stress, spot challenges early, and adapt smoothly as circumstances change.

What to focus on:

- **Identify the key factors that could change**
 - Membership and pledge income (what if renewals fall by 10%? 25%?)
 - Underwriting and sponsorship revenue
 - Foundation or major donor support
 - Opportunities for shared services or new funding
- **Build a few simple scenarios**
 - Base case: If things stay roughly steady (no growth, no big dips)
 - Cautious case: If revenues drop 10–25% beyond the CPB cut
 - Optimistic case: If new partnerships or funding opportunities emerge
- **Map your response to each scenario**
 - For each case, outline:
 - What additional cuts or savings would be triggered
 - Which services or staff adjustments might be needed
 - What opportunities you'd accelerate (new revenue, partnerships)
- **Set clear “tripwires”**
 - Identify the signs that will trigger action (e.g., “If cash on hand drops below X weeks, we pause production on Y program”).
 - Communicate these triggers with your board and leadership so decisions don't get delayed.

- **Revisit regularly**
 - Review your scenarios every 60–90 days or when major financial shifts occur.
 - Adjust assumptions based on what you’re learning — this isn’t a one-time exercise.

Helpful tools:

- Webinar: Scenario and Contingency Planning for Local Public Media ([recording](#) and [slides](#))
 - [Scenario Planning Workbook](#)
 - [Scenario Planning for Nonprofits](#) (Bridgespan Group)
 - Webinar: Contingency Planning for Public Media (COVID) ([recordings](#) and [slides](#))
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Final Thoughts

You don't have to solve everything today. But you can take one step – and then another. This guide is here to help you focus on the most important things, make clear decisions, and move forward with confidence.

Additional Resources

- [Managing Through Tough Times](#) (Bridgespan Group)
- [Data for Decisions](#) (Local News Catalyst)
- [Power in Partnerships](#) (Local News Catalyst)
- [The Threat to Local Public Media](#) (Local News Catalyst)