

CPB SAS FY2019

Local Content Services Report

Question 1 - Goals and approach to address identified community issues, needs, interests.

The fiscal year was rich with community interaction about local issues, needs and interests, as VPR concluded a 14-county Tell Me More Tour in which VPR staff members met with more than 700 people. The tour focused on three key questions – what should people know about where you live, what issues are important to you, and how VPR can serve your community better. What VPR heard during this tour was a thirst for more local news coverage as a result of the decline in the number of journalists reporting on Vermont. People told VPR they also are interested in solutions, arts coverage, community connections and diversity. Issues of importance that rose to the surface during the tour included an ageing and shrinking population, affordability, school consolidation, climate change and addiction. The goal of the coverage is reflected in VPR’s vision – to explore the whole Vermont story, together.

A large volume of local news and feature content is produced at VPR each week, all aimed at serving the public interest. A feature series that goes to the heart of one of the issues that arose in the Tell Me More Tour was “My Heart Still Beats,” a six-part series from the organization Writers for Recovery and VPR. The project featured voices and original writing from Vermont’s recovery community. The series was released as a podcast, and interviews were broadcast on VPR’s weekday news magazine Vermont Edition and on Weekend Edition Saturday. The impact of the project involved high levels of awareness which was indicated by the large number of downloads – more than 166,000. The project culminated in a community listening session and Q&A.

Many issues at the heart of Vermont’s communities come into focus in the citizen Legislature in Vermont. VPR keeps a close watch on proposed legislation and community input. Examples of VPR’s public service of community issues at this level included live broadcasts from the Statehouse, including the state-of-the-state and budget addresses from the governor. VPR reported on the decision by a local representative to step away from the Legislature due to racial harassment in her community. The legislative reporting also included comprehensive coverage of issues such as the minimum wage, paid family leave, clean water funding, the Act 46 education law, and childcare advocates.

On Vermont’s big day of grassroots democracy, Town Meeting Day, VPR kept a close ear to the ground on the issues of importance to local communities. On Town Meeting Day, VPR produced a live blog with photos, social media posts, and updates from meetings around the state. Additional newscasts were added to the broadcast schedule. School budgets are often at the heart of local discussions as they were on this Town Meeting Day, and VPR produced a two-part feature on how two communities, Calais and Jamaica, were addressing the issue.

With 2018 being an election year, VPR kept Vermonters on top of the issues and politics through news reporting, social media, voting guides, public opinion polling, and candidate debates. Every statewide candidate was offered the opportunity to participate in an interview on VPR. A pair of public opinion

surveys was conducted during this election cycle, with one of them falling into this fiscal year. In October, VPR tapped into community concerns in the second of the two surveys conducted in partnership with Vermont PBS. The second survey (with full transparency and access to the full database provided to the public) examined many topics. Among them were the issues of paid family leave, racism in Vermont, affordability, hierarchy of living expenses, sexual harassment in the workplace, and whether respondents planned to stay in or leave Vermont in the future. A set of seven political debates (four in partnership with Vermont PBS) aimed to illuminate the differences between candidates so that voters could make the best choice possible when Election Day arrived. A digital “Time to Vote” guide was produced and published on the VPR website. The website saw an increase in usage over the previous election, indicating that VPR was providing a significant educational resource for the community.

Meanwhile, after the 2018 election, some big political news was percolating that had nationwide appeal. Early in 2019, VPR’s Bob Kinzel broke the news that Sen. Bernie Sanders would again seek the Democratic nomination for president. This local-to-national story was a big one for Vermont, and it received full attention from VPR’s journalists over the air, in social media posts, on NPR and with the New England News Collaborative.

VPR’s efforts to connect with community have been amplified through the production of the podcast and broadcast of *Brave Little State*. The podcast invites questions from listeners, it’s voted on by the public, and then VPR reporters investigate the winning question in consultation with the original question-asker. The model has reflected a rich sense of place through the reporting. Examples in this fiscal year of in-depth, documentary-style podcast reporting included how climate change is affecting Vermont right now, why Vermont has a housing crunch, the pros and cons of heating with wood, and the incarceration rate of African-Americans in Vermont. In addition, the podcast went to Washington to profile the life and work of longtime Congressman Peter Welch.

Vermont Edition engages with the public every weekday on issues of importance to the people and communities of Vermont. Just a sampling of the dozens and dozens of programs produced each year include the following:

- Live remote from Rutland, Vermont Edition examined the impact of college closures in Vermont with a 40-person studio audience.
- A discussion of a new group focused on Vermont professionals of color.
- The impact of the declining number of refugees on Vermont refugee families.
- What we know about vaping.
- Can Vermont find a way to curb health care costs?
- Understanding media mergers and their impact on Vermont news.
- Treating the rising rate of Lyme disease.
- Food insecurity in the homes of Vermont’s migrant farmers
- Banning the single-use plastic bag
- Living with a suspended license in rural Vermont

In another occasional series, VPR identified community issues by looking into programs that were funded with public money to find out if they achieved their goals. Essentially, did the funded program work? The *Did It Work* series examined whether improvements to boost business at a regional airport actually met the goal. The series also looked at whether longtime funding for a long Amtrak route through Vermont was “working” yet. Still another episode reviewed whether a \$25,000 investment to promote food products in Japan actually reaped benefits for Vermont.

A raft of single-topic stories and projects went even further to examine community interests and issues. These include examinations of manure runoff pollution from farms, attempts to keep general stores open, one veteran’s challenge to raise suicide awareness, how a university student died in the winter cold, and consolidations - of churches, EMS services, and school districts.

Still another way VPR connects with community interests is the broadcast of an annual star-gazing party in August, conducted with the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium in which Vermonters adjourn to their backyards with their radios, look up at the night sky, and go on an audio-visual journey to ponder the universe as seen from this one spot on the planet.

One of the most popular educational services from VPR is the *But Why* podcast for kids with Jane Lindholm, which also receives occasional broadcast air time. Begun in 2015, *But Why* is a program led by kids themselves. They ask the questions and the host and the program finds the answers. *But Why* has reached children in all 50 states and in 48 countries with its direct approach to questions about life, things and the environment around us. The program is used in educational services such as the Listenwise project, a listening skills project for students. The programs may be produced for children, but they are equally compelling for adults. Recent topics include “What Happens When A President Is Impeached?” and “Why Do Lions Roar?” Others include “How do We Taste Food?” And “Why Are Some Words Bad?” And “How Is Paper Made?” Every month, these are the questions that are engaging a larger and larger audience. Last year, *But Why* took a live program about birds to packed venues around the state, providing an in-person educational experience for kids.

Another way VPR plumbs the interests of the community is through its Community Forum, which regularly reflects on VPR programs.

In all, VPR employs a variety of approaches to address community issues and needs. Daily newscasts, Vermont Edition news magazine programs, Brave Little State podcasts, investigative series, digital guides, public debates, educational podcasts like *But Why*, and public events where citizens can have discussions with news reporters represent the core of the public service. And with its long winters, Vermonters look to VPR for school closing announcements, as they did again this year. VPR continues to try to strengthen this core to meet audiences where they are to provide the information they need to effect their best participation as citizens in our democracy.

Question 2 – Key initiatives and the variety of partners with whom VPR engaged to connect communities.

VPR engaged a number of partnerships and collaborations in this fiscal year, both news and cultural in nature.

The first full year of a partnership with the online news nonprofit Vermont Digger resulted in a daily complement of additional news items prepared by Vermont Digger in VPR newscasts. This daily collaboration led to further reporting partnerships with the organization.

The close of the 2018 election year brought deep public service collaboration with VPR and Vermont PBS. The partnership included the second of two public opinion surveys that polled Vermonters of issues of importance to them. The partnership produced a joint website to hold all of the data from the polling, which was made available to everyone who wanted to see it and use it. Also early in the fiscal year, the two organizations partnered on a set of candidate debates that brought the voices and faces of the office-seekers to more people than either organization could have accomplished on its own.

They Are Us, a series of seven sound-rich stories that brought listeners first-person accounts of what it's like to be part of the mental health system in Vermont, was produced in partnership with independent producer Erica Heilman. Listeners responded with notes to VPR indicating that the profiles had changed their understanding of mental health issues.

My Heart Still Beats was collaboration with Writers for Recovery that resulted in a six-part series featuring conversations about addiction and original writing from the recovery community around Vermont. Six people opened up with their personal stories with listeners in order to share their experiences with the hope of helping others.

Another partnership that connected communities was the Fourth of July collaboration with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. VPR and the VSO teamed up to record and broadcast the summer concert with patriotic favorites. The VSO returned for a holiday concert with a studio audience in December.

Other cultural partnerships that brought increased awareness of musical events to Vermonters included a set of live performances in the VPR studios. These partner performances included the Opera Company of Middlebury, the Spruce Peak Chamber Music Society, and the Heliand Consort, to name a few.

In this fiscal year, VPR and Vermont PBS began another collaboration with the development of a project to examine the future of rural Vermont. The project, named "This Land, the Changing Story of Rural Vermont," was in place by the end of the fiscal year and the collaboration planned an in-depth examination on the future of rural Vermont. The central idea was that rural communities are critical to the state's identity and to the next generation of Vermonters. After months of planning, the two organizations put into place a plan for a comprehensive analysis of the rural condition through a set of in-depth projects. A joint website was created to hold the project, and eight discrete sub-projects were underway, which included:

- Rural Life Survey, the trunk of the thesis for the project
- A set of reported news stories on the results of the survey
- A broadcast event called *Rural Stories on Stage* with live audience in Randolph
- A Future of Farming video docu-series
- A set of Vermont Edition programs to analyze issues surfaced in the poll

- A Vermont This Week television program analysis of survey issues

A third collaboration with Vermont PBS includes the weekly production of a “News Minute,” a VPR hosted report of top news headlines, which leads into the PBS NewsHour on Thursday nights, connecting more members of the community to local topics.

As mentioned above, VPR connects with community interests with the broadcast of the annual star gazing party in August, in partnership with Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium in St. Johnsbury.

And a discussion of collaborations in the community interest would not be anywhere near complete without mentioning the longtime partnership between VPR and the Fairbanks called the Eye on the Sky. This collaboration brings to Vermonters day in and day out the in-depth story of the weather for the region. Through a set of forecasts and journals, the meteorologists convey what’s happening with the weather and how it affects our everyday lives over the air and online. A joint website provides myriad details, including a radar map.

A continuing collaboration is occurring with public radio stations in New England in the New England News Collaborative. Stations in the Collaborative share news and feature stories of general interest to New Englanders. The Collaborative also produces the weekly hour-long magazine broadcast program “Next.”

Finally, it was a loose collaboration of VPR, the Bennington Museum, the Bennington Banner, the Bennington Public Library and the family of composer and pianist Ernest Murray that made it possible for VPR to collect and distribute the story of the historic “Bennington Battle March” for the annual Bennington Battle Day holiday in Vermont. The project brought to life the origins of the music, the history that inspired the music, the story of the life of the composer as well as a chance to experience the music itself.

Question 3 – Impact of key initiatives and partnerships in community.

One example of the impact of VPR news and feature programming was the storytelling project VPR produced in collaboration with Writers for Recovery, called *My Heart Still Beats*. The podcast and broadcast series featured six Vermonters who shared their stories about addiction and their original writing. After the series concluded, some from the group came together for a live event at the Turning Point Center in Burlington, Vt., to put a face of the issue and to discuss the importance of sharing their stories. Several of the many responses are below:

- “Thank you, Abby. Beautifully presented. Love your insights about the mental obsession. I learned a lot from you. So joyful to hear that you are writing, painting - doing so much creatively. Keep up the hard, good work!”
- “A huge thanks to you and the rest of the team for both doing this critical work and bringing the public’s focus to it. This is how change happens. So inspiring.”
- “Just wanted to commend you for the work you are doing with Writers for Recovery and the My Heart Still Beats project. I heard it on VPR and recognized your voice before I heard the credits. This is exactly what is needed to destigmatize the disease of addiction. “

But Why, the podcast for curious kids, from VPR has become a high engagement project with several hundred thousand downloads per month, answering kids' questions in Vermont and all over the country. An example of the impact of But Why can be seen in its live community programs that are taken around the state. "But Why Live! Hoots And Whistles" played to a packed Latchis Theatre in Brattleboro, Vt., on a Saturday in the middle of winter for an interactive show about owls and other birds. Hearing the audience make bird noises and spread their arms like wings was a clear indication of the educational impact of this program.

It is a goal of VPR to produce stories with impact, stories that shine a light on an important issue that affects the people in the region, stories that give people a voice, and stories that hold government and other organizations accountable. Below is just a small sampling of stories that meet those goals and that engaged the public.

- Hartford immigration: Two-hundred people packed the Hartford High School auditorium to hear about an ordinance that would limit communication with between town police and federal immigration authorities.
- Judge orders arrest of debtors: While it has been illegal for more than 150 years to arrest people in Vermont for unpaid debts, over the last 20 years, about 200 people were issued arrest warrants in a Vermont County small claims court. The personal story about the impact on one family resulted in a change in the system.
- When a Vermont farm family was given a grant to start up a food stall at the Boston Public Market, it sounded like a good idea to bring fresh produce and the Vermont identity to Boston, but in VPR's Did It Work series, it was revealed that the \$25,000 grant did not offset what the farmer said was a \$200,000 loss. The series showed the impact on the individual businessperson as well as the state program, which state officials determined was a success even though the individual project was not a success.
- VPR reported on the death of a first-year student at the University of Vermont who succumbed after passing out in a snowbank. UVM suspended all fraternity activity and began an investigation, and Burlington police also looked into the case, deciding not to present any charges. The tragic story had an impact in the community and raised questions about the fraternity system.
- One story of local and national impact was VPR's breaking news that Sen. Bernie Sanders would seek the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. The announcement and subsequent coverage raised awareness not only of the candidate but of the state of Vermont and policies and culture in the Green Mountain State.
- VPR has provided continuing coverage of manure runoff from agricultural operations and has raised awareness of the issue for Vermonters.

The second of two public opinion surveys, one which opened the fiscal year, addressed the issue of racism in Vermont. The information in the poll provided insight into how Vermonters view racism with 53 percent saying it is a big problem or somewhat of a problem, while 43 percent said it's a small problem or not an issue. Public opinion surveys conducted in collaboration with Vermont PBS are bringing a higher awareness and opportunity for action to improve the lives of Vermonters on this and a variety of topics.

And VPR regularly receives correspondence from listeners in the community. Here are two sample emails that are indicative of impact in the community:

- “Hi, this morning I heard a story in which a reporter from the Orleans/Caledonian Record was interviewed about local races. As a resident of the NEK, I really appreciated feeling represented on VPR. I know you folks have been making efforts to hear what other parts of the state want to hear reported. Thank you for making this effort.” —Mark, St. Johnsbury
- “I absolutely LOVED the "Vermonters: Are You Ready to Vote?" guide. Thank you so much! It was so well done and incredibly helpful to me to find this "quick look" at VPR's campaign 2018 coverage all in one place. I also listened to some of the interviews and think the interviewers did an excellent and impartial job of interviewing the candidates. I feel fortunate that VPR exists. Thanks for all your hard work and dedication.” —Lucy, Plainfield

Question 4 – Investigate, meet needs of minority and other diverse audiences.

VPR produced a variety of projects, stories and studies to meet the needs of minority and diverse audiences in this fiscal year, including a public opinion survey that identified Vermonters’ views of the problem of racism in the state. For example, the survey asked hundreds of Vermonters to what extent they “think racism is a problem in Vermont today.” Fifty-three percent of respondents said racism is either a “big problem” or “somewhat of a problem.” And 43 percent responded that racism is a “small problem” or not an issue. Only 40 percent said in the same survey that “too little” was being done to combat racism. This survey provided important information to Vermonters about citizen attitudes, which can then lead to a better society. In FY20, VPR (in collaboration with Vermont PBS) planned to repeat the question in another survey to see if attitudes have changed.

VPR provided in-depth coverage over many months of the case of Kiah Morris, the former state representative and the only female African-American member of the Vermont Legislature who withdrew from her re-election bid due to instances of racial harassment.

The issue of racism and what it looks like in Vermont also was explored in Vermont Edition, VPR’s weekday news magazine program. The incidents involving Rep. Morris, put a spotlight on the issue in Vermont, and VPR further shined a light on the topic with guests who could speak to the experiences, such as Sha’an Moulert, the co-coordinator of “I Am Vermont, Too,” and Beverly Little Thunder, who is a two-spirit Lakota Elder and a board member of the Peace and Justice Center in Burlington, VT.

Following a year in which Vermont’s governor signed legislation to create new programs to combat racism, a cabinet-level post was created in the executive branch to address the issue. VPR’s Peter Hirschfeld profiled Xusana Davis, who is Vermont’s first director of racial equity. Davis’s job is to conduct a review to seek out systemic racism in all three branches of government and then come up with a plan to address it. In the coverage Hirschfeld found that data also shows that people of color leave government jobs a higher rate than white employees.

The questions - "Why are there so many African-Americans incarcerated in Vermont? And is the rate higher here in Vermont than most other states?" came to VPR’s people-powered podcast and broadcast Brave Little State from Rosie Chase of Huntington, VT. True to Brave Little State’s mission, VPR reporters then proceeded to investigate the question, involving the question-asker along the way. In this case, Brave Little State discovered that, while Vermont has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the country, it does have one of the highest rates of African-American incarceration. In a documentary format, the program attempted to get to the bottom of this question. There was not a question about the data or the facts, yet the cause was harder to nail down. The reporting investigated implicit bias, out-of-state records, and whether Vermont as a whole even saw the question as a problem.

In this fiscal year, VPR collaborated with the Flynn Center's "New Voices Project," in which VPR brought a series of three musical events to the VPR studios in order to showcase world musical traditions. The series celebrated diasporic music-making of regional acts and communities.

VPR also addressed the issue of migrant dairy farm workers in this fiscal year, as it has done in continuing coverage over a number of years. One issue reported in depth involved migrant dairy farm workers who were identified for deportation after they received driver's licenses. A federal lawsuit stated that Vermont was forwarding names, photos and car registrations to Immigration and Customs. VPR planned to continue to follow this topic during FY20.

Meanwhile, Vermont Edition addressed the issue of migrant farm workers who are facing challenges to getting the food they need.

And because Vermont shares a border with Canada, Customs and Border Protection issues arise and are covered by VPR's journalists. In one such case, agents had set up a new immigration checkpoint in the town of South Hero, Vt. It was notable because it was the first internal checkpoint that had been set up in Vermont since 2009.

VPR has followed for several years the effort in Rutland, Vt., to bring 100 Syrian refugee families to the city, a former mayor's attempt to address the refugee crisis and also to boost a declining population. Ultimately, only three families were allowed to come, and VPR looked back on the program in a three-part series that showed that the community is largely where it was before the debate – seeking to increase its population, but not with refugees. In the reporting, VPR's Nina Keck revealed that the former mayor's only regret over the resettlement debate and losing his position as mayor was that he couldn't bring more families to Rutland. Meanwhile, one of the families who arrived in Rutland has found it to be a "magical place."

In more coverage of immigration, VPR reports on Vermont's grassroots local democracy on Town Meeting Day. One town, Hartford, is deciding whether they will challenge federal law on communications between local officials and federal officials on immigration issues. The Hartford ordinance would prohibit employees from sharing personal immigration information. The issue came up in the current fiscal year, and VPR plans further coverage in FY20 of the Town Meeting Day vote.

On Vermont Edition, VPR provided coverage of the Vermont Department of Libraries decision to change the name of their middle grade book reading project. The project had been named "Dorothy's List" for Arlington author Dorothy Canfield Fisher. But when it came to light that the author had connections to the eugenics movement and that there was criticism of stereotyped portrayals of Native Americans and French Canadians in her work, the decision was made to change the name.

This does not represent the full extent of coverage of minority and diverse audiences, but it is a representative sample.

Question 5 – Impact of CPB funding on ability to serve community. What were we able to do that otherwise would not have been able to do.

Because VPR is a community licensee and receives no funds from the Vermont state government or from a university, the CPB funding is an important source of funding and supports station activities that serve the public.

In this time of media transition, stable funding sources are necessary in order for a public radio station to serve its traditional essential broadcast role while developing new ways of serving the public.

It should be noted that VPR continues to benefit from the previous CPB grant (now expired) that created the New England News Collaborative. This network of New England stations has been able to provide regional coverage across New England of stories that resonate from state to state around common themes. VPR also continues to broadcast the weekly program "Next," which features New England content in a magazine format, which is a unique New England program.

Stable funding sources make it possible for VPR to establish a strong system of local news reporting in which Vermonters can rely upon not just for one grant cycle, but over a long period of time. Stable funding sources also make it possible to maintain transmitters to serve a mountainous state with essential services that provide the public with local, national and world news as well as daily weather forecasts, alerts and warnings. Being able to count on reliable funding also makes it possible to serve the public with improved and new technology as it develops and as the public uses it. As listeners go back and forth between the terrestrial broadcast service and new streaming services, the development and maintenance of multiple technologies is key to the public interest.

The CPB grant also makes it possible to purchase the NPR news programming that Vermonters rely upon for trusted information, breaking news, and continuous coverage when there are important events. NPR continues to be central to the public radio system and helping stations develop their public service to the best of their ability.