

Philanthropic Support, Corporate Support & Editorial Independence: How They Fit Together at WLRN Public Media

The following policy will be effective February 12, 2019 and applies to all content areas across WLRN Public Media. This document was adopted from NPR's "Philanthropic Support, Corporate Support & Editorial Independence" policy dated February 6, 2017.

This Is, And Has Been, How We Do Things

We greatly appreciate the financial support we receive from individuals, foundations and corporations. Without their help, WLRN could not have become one of the nation's most respected public media enterprises.

But those supporters have always known that we can't be bought. We are not "journalists, producers or programmers for hire." We serve the public and follow the facts where they lead us. We don't fit the facts to please anyone.

This document lays out how we think about the relationship between our supporters and our programming and how we protect the reputation that WLRN has built.

Our Guiding Principles

The vision of WLRN is to be the most trusted, valued and supported Public Media enterprise in South Florida.

The mission of WLRN is to provide information and learning services with a commitment to excellence in serving local, national and international communities.

To successfully execute our vision and mission we must guard our editorial integrity and independence.

At the same time, WLRN is a non-profit organization that relies on financial support from a variety of sources. Many of them have their own agendas or interests.

We can remain independent while also accepting such support by sticking to these principles:

No outside organizations or individuals, including those who support us financially, tell us what to report, produce, program or how to do our work.

We are transparent about where our financial support comes from.

Our journalists, producers and programmers show no favoritism – and avoid even the perception of it – toward our financial supporters.

When our supporters are in the news or the subjects in our documentaries or other original programming, we remind our audiences about the support. But, our reporting, programming and original productions are not otherwise affected.

We maintain an open access policy for those interested in sponsoring or funding our work, but we reserve the right to reject support from any entity and will do so for the reasons described later in this document (in Section 3).

How Do We Hold True To Our Principles And Get The Support We Need?

1. Journalism and Storytelling Drives What We Do

WLRN's journalists, producers and programmers decide what beats we cover, which stories we pursue and how those stories and programs are presented. The ideas come from across the organization. Producers, programmers, correspondents, hosts and editors all contribute, and we value their input. They are led by the General Manager, Vice President of News, the Executive Producer, News Director, Editorial Director, Digital Director and Radio and Television Programming Departments who set WLRN's programming and editorial agendas.

The professionals at Friends of WLRN (Development Team) are the liaisons between WLRN and the people or organizations that can provide financial support. These professionals find the money that helps WLRN produce the content the South Florida community deeply desires - with the goal to raise general operating support whenever possible, or to secure support for broad themes and budgets that give the station the greatest flexibility to successfully achieve its mission.

This is worth emphasizing: WLRN doesn't accept money to do stories or produce original programming that others want done. WLRN solicits and accepts support to do the stories that its journalists and producers want to do.

2. WLRN Content Leaders and Development Talk To Each Other

Content outlets have long tried to maintain "firewalls" between their journalists, producers and programmers and the departments that bring in the money that supports the work. But in 2012 NPR noted in its Ethics Handbook that while "firewall is a useful metaphor," it shouldn't be thought of as an impenetrable wall. After all, for NPR's Development professionals to be able to do their jobs, information has to flow from News to Development about the work that NPR journalists are doing. Development needs to know the coverage areas, broad themes, types of stories and initiatives that News wants to pursue.

To make sure the conversations happen, there will be meetings between Development leaders and some combination of these WLRN leaders:

- General Manager
- Vice President of News
- Executive Producer
- News Director
- Editorial Director
- Digital Editor
- Television Production Manager
- Radio Program Director
- Television Programming

We will always keep in mind, however, that the journalists, producers and programmers at WLRN decide what gets covered produced and programmed.

3. Then Development Seeks Appropriate Support

Our Development professionals focus on philanthropic organizations, corporations and individuals that:

- Seek to advance the mission of WLRN.
- Understand our editorial firewall and that they cannot tell us what to report, what to produce or what to program.
- Care about more than a single issue. Otherwise, it could look like WLRN has been paid to cover that topic.
- Are interested, broadly, in supporting good journalism and storytelling.
- Have established track records of supporting journalism and storytelling that is in line with WLRN's plans – or are looking to begin supporting such journalism and storytelling.
- Have done nothing that, by association, could damage WLRN's reputation or raise questions about our independence.

After the vetting of potential donors, Development drafts funding proposals, working with WLRN for content expertise and News plans.

Here are some general rules of thumb at this stage:

- All proposals and contracts will include language that stresses WLRN's editorial independence.

- Since requests for funds to support general operations do not raise ethical concerns, WLRN News and Programming leadership does not need to review these proposals.
- Requests for support aimed at a specific type of coverage (“global health issues,” for example) or a specific series (“Joe’s Big Idea” or “Code Switch,” to cite two) do need a review by WLRN News and Programming leadership. They will be wary, for example, of language that implies any specific type of stories or a specific number of stories will be produced.

Whenever possible, requests for support should not include promises that are overly specific. Potential funders want “deliverables,” but WLRN can’t guarantee that a specific number of stories will be produced in a specific time-period. Proposals may include an expected range (“10 to 25 reports in 2019,” for example), but only if WLRN News and Programming leadership approve the language.

5. Agreements Are Reached

Once a funder or donor commits to a gift, WLRN Senior Management needs adequate time to review funding agreements before they are signed.

6. Then It’s Up to WLRN to Make Sure There’s Proper Disclosure

Earlier, the idea of a firewall was discussed. We will put a small window in that wall because, even though we want our content to be insulated from any “dangerous or corrupting force,” transparency is one of our core principles. The public expects and deserves to know where our support is coming from. WLRN complies and will continue to comply with all disclosure policies and procedures as required by federal and state agencies as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

7. In Conclusion

NPR’s Ethics Handbook puts it this way: “We will fulfill the high standard we owe the public if we hold true to our principles.” <http://ethics.npr.org/category/k-practice/>

“Independence” is one of those principles, and we believe that “to secure the public’s trust, we must make it clear that our primary allegiance is to the public.” <http://ethics.npr.org/category/e-independence/>