

Subject: NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board 2023 Report to Licensee

To: University of Illinois Board of Trustees
Dr. Tim Killeen, President, University of Illinois System
Dr. Janet L. Gooch, Chancellor, University of Illinois Springfield
Brandon Schwab, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost
Molly Jo Lamb, Executive Director, Center for State Policy and Leadership

From: NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board

Date: September 5, 2023

This letter to the University of Illinois leadership is written to fulfill the NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board's obligation to advise the station's governing board as outlined below.

NPR Illinois considers maintaining a community advisory board to be a best practice. The NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board (CAB) meets regularly to offer perspectives to the management team and, as directed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Community Service Grant, has:

1. The right to review the station's programming goals.
2. The right to review the service provided by the station.
3. The right to review significant policy decisions rendered by the station.
4. The obligation to advise the station's governing body of whether the station's programming and other significant policies are meeting the specialized educational and cultural needs of the communities served by the station, and to make recommendations that the CAB deems appropriate to meet such needs (47 U.S.C. § 396(k)(8)).

In addition to advising the station's governing body, the NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board meets quarterly around the following goals:

1. Provide diverse perspectives on public affairs and community engagement opportunities that inform the station's programming and services.
2. Raise awareness and open doors to new audiences for NPR Illinois.
3. Commit to 100% board giving as part of a broader campaign to support sustainability through fundraising, memberships and other sources.
4. Serve as ambassadors for NPR Illinois within the University of Illinois System and at the local, state and federal levels, when needed.

The NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board has discussed the programming, services and significant policy decisions for Fiscal Year 2023. Each of these areas is discussed below.

Policies:

The CAB is concerned that the University of Illinois Springfield's policies and procedures make the fulfillment of NPR Illinois' mission more difficult to accomplish.

NPR Illinois is the University of Illinois Springfield's radio station and, as such, advances the mission and image of UIS in the local community. In our 2021 letter, the CAB noted its concern with the University's plan to cut its support for the radio station, predicting that this decision "threatens the long-term sustainability of NPR Illinois." We fear that this prediction has proven prescient: the University has not only cut funding, but its policies have hampered efforts to secure replacement funding.

The CAB understands that the University's hiring process has been designed, reasonably, for academic hires. But this process, which requires multiple-levels of position requests and multiple-reviews of candidates, moves too slowly for fast-moving markets: when a reporter or other staff member leaves, replacing them can take up to a year. At one point, NPR Illinois had eight reporters; currently it has only two and is seeking to hire more. The station has been seeking to fill these positions for several months after previous searches failed; the University's hiring process has extended the process far beyond the broadcasting industry standard.

The protracted hiring process is the main reason, as noted in our 2022 letter, that NPR Illinois' traditional responsibility for coordinating Statehouse coverage was taken over by Chicago-based WBEZ: it has the flexibility to add staff expeditiously and can leverage external funding and advertising revenue with more flexibility than allowed under University policies. The most recent searches for reporters came to naught, as candidates accept positions elsewhere.

An inflexible hiring process affects other staff positions as well. NPR Illinois was only able to hire its first sponsorship account executive at the beginning of FY2023, in year two of the five-year funding transition; a second started work in June, 2023. The CAB was dismayed to learn that the advancement officer who was working with the NPR Illinois director of development to diversify its fundraising efforts has retired. A replacement has not yet been hired.

The CAB recognizes that the University's hiring processes are, in part, determined by state statute. But it is our understanding that in other areas that require more nimble hiring processes (such as athletics), the University has developed them. We recommend that the University work with the management of NPR Illinois to create a hiring process that complies with state statute but is more streamlined and fast enough to allow the hiring of the staff needed to fulfill the station's mission.

At least in part because of the University's slow hiring process, NPR Illinois is approximately a year behind where it planned to be in raising funds to replace those cut by the University. Because these delays seem to have been caused by University policies, the CAB encourages the University to extend its support for the University's radio station an additional year. Since the

General Assembly has passed and Governor Pritzker has approved a 7% increase in funding public universities, this should be more feasible than originally anticipated.

Programming and Services:

Media plays a crucial role in our democracy, as a watchdog preventing abuse of power by the government and other powerful actors. Traditional newspapers have been financially gutted by the Internet and/or bought by major conglomerates, news staffs have been dramatically reduced. Many communities in our listening area -- Springfield, Jacksonville, Decatur -- have suffered from this process. Because of this, NPR Illinois' work is more crucial than ever and aligns well with UIS' core academic mission as a public affairs university.

The CAB recommends (as it did in 2021 and 2022), that NPR Illinois continue efforts to dedicate necessary resources to implement its plans to hire multiple reporters and UIS Public Affairs Reporting interns to focus on locally produced Statehouse coverage and local government coverage, including in-depth features and analysis to round out the daily headlines. Current staffing levels are not sufficient to fulfill the essential watchdog function for public accountability in state and local government. The University should, as noted above, work with NPR Illinois to facilitate expanding its staff, especially since this aligns with the University's mission.

NPR Illinois (as well as NPR nationally) has sought to expand its audience, reaching new demographic groups. This has been reflected in the programs it carries, the guests who appear on its shows, and the voices one hears on the air. Recently, NPR Illinois held a "listening" session with Springfield Southeast High School students; the issues the students discussed are in the NPR wheelhouse and the station is continuing to reflect on how to best address this audience.

Expanding the audience has been a longer-term project of NPR Illinois. *Community Voices*, now in its third year, provides the audience with the opportunity to learn about people and businesses in the Springfield area. Not as "hard hitting" as more traditional news programs, *Community Voices* provides a respite for some audience members who are tired of negative news stories. (This was a concern heard from the high school students, for example.) Another way to reach new audiences is for NPR Illinois to share its reporting via different media, such as podcasts, an email newsletter, and social media channels. The CAB encourages the station to continue these efforts with additional "listening" sessions and exploring further expansion into new delivery channels.

NPR Illinois locally produced news programs, such as *State Week* and *Statewide*, as well as partnerships with Illinois Public Media to broadcast shows such as *The 21st*, show that it continues to cover the Statehouse and to report on news in central Illinois. This sort of news reporting has been NPR Illinois' bread-and-butter for nearly five decades. The CAB encourages the station to continue this work and to seek to expand it by expanding its staff to a full complement of reporters.

NPR Illinois also carries NPR's national programming. The NPR programs with the biggest audiences are those that air during the morning and evening drive time: *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Marketplace*. NPR Illinois also carries additional news programs, such as *The BBC World Service*, *On Point*, *On the Media*, and *1A*.

Beyond news, NPR Illinois continues to produce its long-running music programs *Bluegrass Breakdown* and *Nightsounds*. It carries national music programs like *Sound Opinions* and *Jazz Night in America*. It also broadcasts national programs exploring national cultural and social issues such as *Fresh Air*, *Snap Judgment*, *Latino USA*, *Travel with Rick Steves*, and *Splendid Table*, as well as the comedy news quiz, *Wait, Wait. . . Don't Tell Me!*

The CAB appreciates the breadth of different sorts of programs NPR Illinois offers its audience, seeing it as a significant service to the community. We encourage the station to continue to examine the offerings from NPR nationally and, when appropriate, add new programs that advance its mission.

Conclusion

The Community Advisory Board appreciates the support the University of Illinois Springfield offers to NPR Illinois. As explained above, we remain concerned about how some of the University's decisions and policies have, and continue, to negatively impact the University's radio station.

In prior years, the CAB has received no feedback or response from this letter. We would welcome such feedback to this letter.

Respectfully submitted,

NPR Illinois Community Advisory Board