

# From a Whisper to a Roar

## 2020-2025



An Organization  
Transformed



# A Media Institution Reimagined

**A little more than five years ago, KALW stepped into a new chapter as an independent nonprofit. What followed has been nothing short of transformational.**

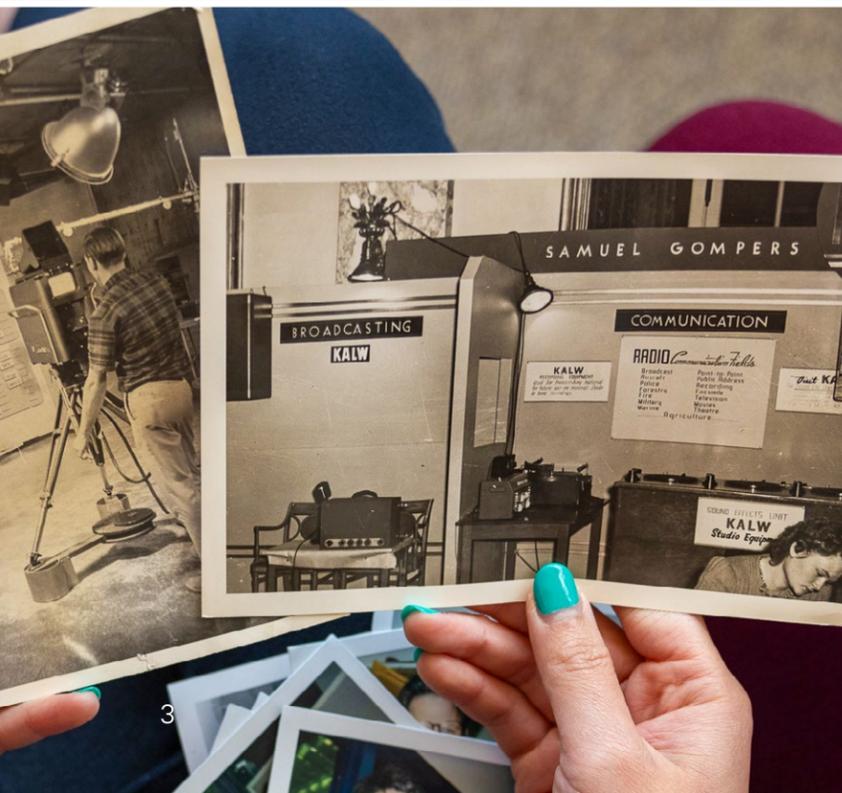
We have expanded our capacity, sharpened our purpose, invested in our people, and begun to really reimagine what a public media institution can be. This report is our first chance to reflect on that arc of growth and momentum, and to share the full scope of what we have built together. Its length reflects both the distance traveled and the ambition ahead. Beginning next year, we will publish annual reports to keep you closely connected to our progress, our questions, and our direction.

When I joined KALW in 2023, I stepped into an organization with uncommon depth: community roots that run decades deep, extraordinary talent across the newsroom and the music team, and a history of innovation that has always outpaced our size. Everything I have learned since then has strengthened my belief that public media can be one of the essential civic institutions of our time. It can strengthen democracy. It can build a sense of belonging. It can help people understand the place they call home and feel connected to one another in ways that matter. I have also seen how hungry the Bay Area and the country is for authentic storytelling, meaningful journalism, and real innovative music programming, and how much becomes possible when we invest intentionally in the people and programs that make this work strong.

Looking ahead, I am both energized and clear-eyed. The opportunities are enormous. The challenges are real. Both call us to rise. We are here to serve the many communities of the Bay and to stand as a national model for how independent media can evolve in a time when trust, creativity, and civic imagination are urgently needed. This report captures the foundation we have laid. The work to come will build on it with courage, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to the many people that make KALW what it is.

Thank you for reading and for walking with us as we shape the next chapter together.

  
**James Kass**  
KALW Executive Director





## The Pivot: An 85-Year-Old Startup

KALW Public Media has always been a place where new ideas take shape. Founded in 1941, KALW was the first FM station west of the Mississippi and a true Bay Area original. That spirit of groundedness and experimentation still guides everything we do. KALW has always been a home for people who want to try something bold, reshape what public media can be, and create work that speaks to the moment.

The 8th and 9th floors of the Warfield Commons Building are empty right now, raw spaces with beautiful views of San Francisco. But soon they will be transformed into studios, classrooms, gathering spaces, and offices. For the first time, KALW will operate out of a single downtown location designed to make our aspirations around the changing role of independent media a reality. Walking through this space, we feel an immense sense of possibility.

### We Can't Help But Recognize How Far We've Come in a Very Short Time

For most of our history, KALW was a small but mighty media organization housed within the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). For the last few decades, a few spare classrooms at Phillip and Sala Burton High School provided us with office space and broadcast studios. We relied on a community of fiercely loyal members to sustain a modest annual operating budget. More than 70% of our revenue came from members, with most of the rest provided by the now defunct Corporation for Public Broadcasting. While we were grateful for the district's support and shared commitment to education and

community, we aspired to professionalize, properly resource, and build sustainability for KALW. So we began exploring a pathway towards organizational independence.

### The Initial Transition

Our transition was steered by several leaders, notably Tina Pamintuan, who served as general manager from 2018 to 2021; and Ben Trefny, who served as interim director from 2021 to 2023. They collaborated with dedicated long-time employees and contractors to set up KALW Public Media as an independent 501(c)(3) organization. This was a series of significant undertakings that included recruiting an initial board, beginning to develop new systems, and transitioning SFUSD staff and contractors to KALW employees.

For the first time, KALW had the foundation to harness resources and grow capacity to broaden talent, explore partnerships, and launch new programmatic directions. Training, production, and music discovery remained essential programs, but the impact of that work now had room to expand. In essence, we became an 85-year-old startup.





## New Opportunities

In 2023, James Kass joined KALW as our executive director. Kass was attracted to the opportunity out of a personal love for the station and his belief in public media's potential to build community through storytelling, narrative, music, and cultural power. Aware of across-the-board reductions in radio listeners nationally, Kass perceived an opportunity for public media to reinvent itself for the contemporary era. While small, KALW has always been an innovator and model within the sector, notably with our award-winning training programs. With more resources and capacity, Kass saw an opportunity for KALW to amplify our reach and programs while becoming a critical model for experimentation in an evolving field.

So in Fall 2023, we began talking about the future. What were our most dearly held values? What impact did we want to make on the world? How could we design every program to advance that change? And how did we need to resource ourselves to move forward?

## Our Strategic Plan & New Home

At the conclusion of this process, we unveiled an ambitious strategic plan, "From a Whisper to a Roar," which serves as a compass as we pursue our work in an increasingly complex landscape. Our plan is a series of queries that simultaneously acknowledge our priorities while leaving space for staff to experiment their ways toward the answers.

We know we want to be a trusted home for under- and mis-represented narratives. We know we want to cultivate an environment where people feel a deep sense of belonging. We know we want to be part of the national effort to reimagine, and thus ensure, that public media is a critical part of our democracy. We know we want to be a durable and resilient organization. And with our track record, we know we're not starting from

square one. But there is so much more we can learn and test and do. That is the strategic focus of our work right now and into the future.

The need for a new home as a necessary investment to advance our strategic priorities was clear. As an organization committed to lasting cross-sector partnerships, we have been thrilled to partner with the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST) to build a sustainable arts and journalism ecosystem. In early 2025, CAST and KALW purchased the nine-story building adjacent to the historic Warfield Theatre, which we've renamed the Warfield Commons. The name matters; not only will it house our future home (the People's Studio), we are currently in the process of recruiting journalists, artists, media-makers, arts and culture nonprofits, and creative entrepreneurs to fill its floors. Located at the five-way intersection of Market, Taylor, Golden Gate, and 6th Streets, the Warfield Commons will bring new energy and resources to the neighborhood, and play a vital role in the revitalization of San Francisco's Mid-Market. We are excited to take up residence on the top two floors, and to partner and cross-pollinate with future neighbors inside and outside the building.

## Committed to You

Part of being an organization committed to responding to community needs is examining our progress and holding ourselves accountable. We do this by reporting to our community on the changes we're making, the things that we're learning, and the outcomes we're seeing. Our audiences, members, and donors are important to us. Their belief in us keeps us going. Their feedback helps us do better. Their questions inspire and energize us. As a valued community member, thank you for engaging with our first annual progress report.

# Milestones of Transformation

There have been many moments of significant change at KALW over the last five years, which we hope will better serve Bay Area communities and audiences here at home and across the globe. These milestones include:

## JANUARY 2020

### KALW Public Media Officially Recognized as an Independent 501(c)(3) Nonprofit



## EARLY 2020

### Pandemic Response & Pivot

KALW pivots during Covid-19 to expand local news and informational programming to help keep the Bay Area connected and informed, supporting local business and communities in new ways.



## JULY 2021

### Launch of New Music Programming

KALW begins a partnership with 25th Street Recording in Oakland and expands our music programming with six new DJs offering an eclectic mix of music, with on-air weeknight programming 8–midnight and noon–midnight on weekends. We also launch KALW Presents to promote a carefully curated list of shows and venues across the Bay Area.



## AUGUST 2023

### James Kass is Hired as KALW Public Media's First Permanent Executive Director



## SEPTEMBER 2023

### Vacant to Vibrant

KALW activates an empty storefront in downtown San Francisco as part of the City's Vacant to Vibrant program, transforming 220 Montgomery Street into an easily accessible interactive event space and gallery featuring public forums, live podcast tapings, music and cultural programming, and so much more.



## 2024

### Uncuffed Expands Award-Winning Program

KALW's *Uncuffed* expands our media training program to the California Institution for Women, amplifying our work to empower system-impacted people with the skills and resources to tell their stories.



## 2024 - 2025

### Growing our Cultural Programming

KALW continues to celebrate arts and culture, launching new programs including our first podcast-in-residence *Not Born Yesterday*, the award-winning program *How Wild*, *The Sights + Sounds Show with Jeneé Darden*, *Bay Made*, *Short Takes with Robert Reich*, and *Notes from the Edge* among other exciting shifts in our programming.



## » Milestones of Transformation

### MARCH 2024

#### Building Internal Development & Communications Capacity

KALW invests in staff to bolster fundraising and communications strategies to build and sustain donor and foundational support and amplify our work to a growing local and national audience.



### SEPTEMBER 2024

#### Enhancing the Audio Academy

After celebrating its 10th anniversary, KALW expands our Audio Academy—a free nine-month journalism training program for early-career journalists—with additional resources and opportunities through a long-term partnership with the Association for Continuing Education (ACE).



### OCTOBER 2024

#### Launch of Strategic Plan & Theory of Change

KALW publishes “From a Whisper to a Roar,” our 2024-2027 vision of transformation for public media, to inspire, inform, learn from, engage, and mobilize our diverse Bay Area community and beyond.



### JULY 2025

#### New Models for Operational Sustainability

The federal government defunds the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, resulting in losses of more than \$400,000 in annual support to KALW. This prompts an incredible response from listeners across the board and requires long-term organizational adaptation and new fundraising models.



### AUGUST 2025

#### Building the Board & Strategic Leadership Team

KALW expands its board of directors and advisors with several new members representing tech, journalism, and other sectors. KALW also empowers a newly formed Strategic Leadership Team to steer the organization’s strategic goals while better investing in all staff.



### 2020-2025

#### Growing Foundational Support

In December 2025, The Ford Foundation makes its first investment in KALW, joining institutional funders like the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, California Arts Council, Svane Family Foundation, Unlikely Collaborators, and others who see KALW as a place where new models are born.



### 2025-2026

#### New Building Acquired: Warfield Commons and the People’s Studio

KALW partners with the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST) to purchase the Warfield Commons building on 988 Market Street, securing a home for future arts, culture, and media organizations as building tenants.



# Our Strategic Framework

As part of our Strategic Planning process, KALW developed a Theory of Change, which clearly articulates the change we hope to achieve.

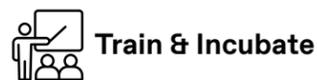
We are living through a profound breakdown in the systems meant to inform, connect, and sustain us. Media consolidation has hollowed out local voices. Political polarization has hardened into distrust. Inequality is widening. Confidence in democratic institutions is eroding. This is not a passing cycle. It is a structural moment, one that exposes just how fragile the conditions for human thriving have become.

KALW exists for moments like this. We believe public media must do more than document decline. It must help build what comes next. We draw energy from the people and organizations across the Bay Area and beyond who are already doing that work by imagining fairer systems, telling truer stories, and creating the civic infrastructure a healthy democracy requires. Our role is to amplify them, train the next generation, and push the power of audio to meet the urgency of this moment.

## Our Strategic Framework is Rooted in these Strategic Practices:

<b>Local-Global</b> Reflects an understanding of relationships between the local and the global	<b>Independent</b> Accountable to humans first; Free of corporate and government influence	<b>Participatory</b> Created with and by communities and audiences with whom we partner
<b>Learning &amp; Discovery</b> Embracing an ongoing cycle of discovery and learning	<b>Truer, Fuller Narrative</b> Plurality of voices represent a full range of human experiences	<b>Oral-Aural Exchange</b> The current between speaker and listener, voice and ear. It is conversation, storytelling, and music made whole

Whether through news and information, music and arts, live events or education, our role is to:



**Train & Incubate**



**Produce & Curate**



**Amplify & Connect**

Through public media, we invest in, amplify, and expand narratives, music, and culture that reflect, include, and speak directly to the people of the Bay Area.

### When our communities feel:

- Informed and entertained by a trusted source
- Seen and heard in public forums
- Connected within and across communities
- Experience a sense of belonging



### These feelings...

Leave us inspired and committed to building a more hopeful future



### This in turn...

Catalyzes our imperative to take actions on behalf of the places we call home

# Moving from Questions to Action

We approached our planning with a series of questions, and committed to a period of experimentation to learn what will best serve you.

**How can we grow our impact as a trusted hub for voices and narratives not yet represented in public media?**

Creating professional pathways into public media has always been a part of our mission. Today, this commitment is visible across our programming. We seek out media-makers, hosts, and DJs who reflect the diversity of the Bay Area, and they in turn produce work that reflects a fuller spectrum of our identities and experiences. We are particularly interested in amplifying the topics, stories, and identities that haven't received enough exposure in the public sphere. Our goal is to help people feel connected to and engaged in shaping the place they call home. We believe this requires as full an understanding of that place as possible, coupled with a sense of inspiration, hope, and agency.

**Our music program** is a great example of our commitment to representing the Bay Area and best serving the communities who live here. Over the past several years, we have sustained beloved music shows while introducing new DJs to broaden our offerings and attract new audiences. All of our hosts and DJs bring attention to Bay Area histories, artists, and events, inviting community members into joyful experiences and the opportunity to better represent the region and all of its music lovers. This is an increasingly rare offering as algorithms become our curators.

We are not content to simply identify diverse talent; we see it as our responsibility to help produce it. KALW has a long history of **nurturing emerging journalists and media-makers** through programs like *Audio Academy*, *tbh*, and *Uncuffed*.

The barrier to entry for journalism can be high. These barriers are a threat to the integrity of our work, filtering out important perspectives and voices, and reducing the breadth of insight that a more diverse and representative field could offer.





## » Nurturing Emerging Journalists and Media-makers



The **Audio Academy** is our free media training program, a known and respected incubator of public media professionals. Participants often come to us from another path or career and from multiple different communities across the Bay Area, all motivated to participate in the important work of broadening public narratives. The *Audio Academy* has been an incubator for innovative audio storytelling for more than 10 years, training more than 200 journalists who have gone on to contribute significantly to public media.



Our **Teen Podcasting Institute** is a stipended fellowship for teenagers who spend the summer learning and producing the next season of KALW's *tbh (to be honest)*, a unique podcast made by, about, and for teenagers. The nationally award-winning program brings cohorts of ambitious and energetic high school students or recent graduates together from across the Bay Area.



**Uncuffed** empowers people in California prisons to produce and tell their own stories. Launched as a training program in 2012 and as a podcast in 2019, *Uncuffed* is an outgrowth of years of collaboration between KALW journalists and people incarcerated at San Quentin and Solano prisons, and the California Institution for Women. Attracting a national and international audience with its powerful storytelling, *Uncuffed* provides a unique lens into the American carceral system. *Uncuffed* is deeply invested in system-impacted leadership, with six formerly incarcerated people on its staff. Co-founder Greg Eskridge was released from San Quentin in 2024 and was immediately hired by KALW on a leadership track. He now hosts the podcast and serves as the program's co-director.



**How can we cultivate an environment where people feel a deep sense of belonging, see themselves authentically represented, and have the power to shape and influence the narrative of their community ?**

Many people think of radio as a one-way platform. Journalists speak, DJs play music, audiences listen. At KALW, we believe that public media should be dialogic. We provide hundreds of thousands of Bay Area residents a way to be informed, to be engaged in civic life, and to discover new music and cultural offerings. We amplify voices: of everyday people, of artists and creators, of leaders and public servants. We collaborate with people from all walks of life to illuminate our shared past, make sense of the present, and imagine the future. We give people opportunities to feel seen and heard, and to walk in someone else's shoes. We elevate that which binds us together, even as we shed light on our differences. We believe that these are essential ingredients to building healthy, democratic communities.

Embracing this approach to public media means leaving the studios and getting out into Bay Area communities through our programming and digital audience engagement, and can be seen in programs like:

- **Your Call**, our daily call-in show, puts the Bay Area at the center of the conversation by inviting you to be in direct dialogue with journalists and thinkers from across the globe.
- **Crosscurrents**, KALW's daily news magazine, informs, engages, and mobilizes people across our community's economic, social, and cultural divides.

- **Bay Made** features a mix of locally produced podcasts and programming to ensure that every community in the region can be heard.
- **KALW Music** brings our love of music to cherished local events such as Stern Grove Festival, California Academy of Sciences NightLife, and Downtown First Thursdays. Our DJs ignite community joy and engage audiences in-person and online with music discovery that reflects the originality of the Bay Area and beyond.
- **Live @ 220:** KALW launches our first-ever live event series. Since opening the doors to our pop-up storefront at 220 Montgomery in fall 2023, we've hosted more than 200 interactive events—including town hall conversations with local leaders, concerts with internationally-renowned artists, panels, live podcast recordings, and parties. Our live events program has collaborated with dozens of community partners including Litquake and First Thursday at 111 Minna Gallery, welcomed more than 5,000 in-person audience members, and broadcasted to thousands of people over radio, podcasts, social media, and web. We can't wait to amplify our live events series at our new home at the Warfield Commons.





**In what ways can KALW inform and influence the evolving practices and values of public media and its relationship to a healthy democracy?**

The last year has underscored the urgency to bolster public media organizations since a free and independent press has come under attack in new ways. In 2025, the federal government defunded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and continued its assault on journalism, seeking to undermine Americans' trust in the media. We believe this is an assault on democracy itself, and an attack on the right of people to access free and reliable information that informs their participation in civic life.

With ongoing support from our members and funders, KALW remains strong in the face of these attacks. But it has never been more clear that public media is an interdependent national ecosystem that is fueled by local stations like KALW, and damage to any part of this system places all of us—organizations and our communities—at risk. We are committed to standing with our peers: learning with and from them, building our collective capacity to thrive, and advocating for our shared future.

Over the last year, we took meaningful steps to build transparency and inform the field. We launched **KALW Speaks**, an essay series

featuring the innovative perspectives and voices of leaders across the organization. *KALW Speaks* engages our growing audiences of practitioners, funders, and general audiences with the findings and outlooks behind a local media organization in a changing media landscape. Since its launch, *KALW Speaks* has covered topics including the importance of public media in the education system, how we train community journalists, and the power of media to transform lives in the carceral system.

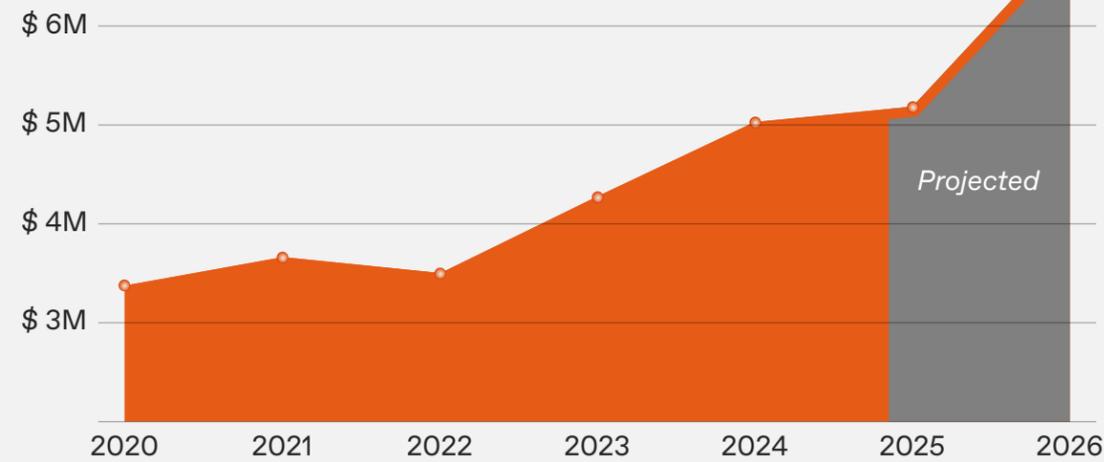
We amplify our ideas and practices **beyond our own platforms** to reach wider readership. For example, *Uncuffed* co-director Greg Eskridge recently shared his story of re-entry in an op-ed for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In it, he shared his experience as a formerly incarcerated person navigating reentry, the role KALW has played in his life, and why he thinks it's important for people to fight for public media. *KALW Speaks* is an opportunity for KALW to paint a more detailed and nuanced picture of the importance and value of public media in a moment when it is under threat.



# Financial Evolution

In 2020, our total annual revenue was \$3.375M, and over the last five years has nearly doubled with revenue in 2026 projected to exceed \$6.5M. This amount does not include capital revenue raised separately for the Warfield Commons project.

**Revenue Growth Over 5 Years**

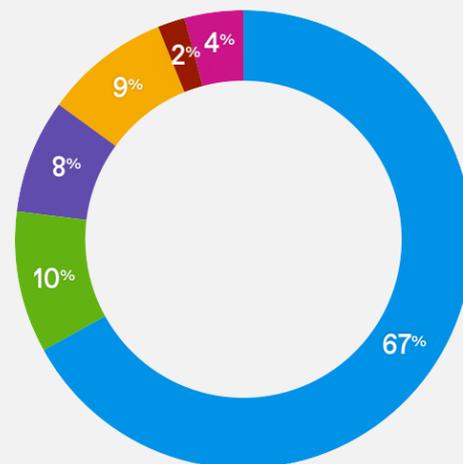


As noted below, KALW’s primary expense is people: from news professionals, artists, and creative media makers to the operational staff necessary to create the original programming you hear and train a new generation of public media leaders, music programmers, and reporters.

KALW’s complete financial statements can be found on our website at: <https://www.kalw.org/kalw-board-governance-finances>

**FY24-25 Expenses**

Personnel Costs	67%
Contracted Services	10%
Operational Expenses	8%
Programming Expenses	9%
Membership Expenses	2%
Professional & Legal	4%



## How must we evolve operationally and financially to secure a robust and durable future?

Our transition to becoming an independent 501(c)3 was motivated by our desire to have more flexibility in how we work, including strengthening our operations and finances to create a more solid platform for an already robust organization. Through efforts to expand fundraising efforts, KALW’s annual operating budget began to increase incrementally. Concurrent with the increases, we slowly expanded our station operations and staff. Today, we have a staff of 41 and contract more than 50 media-makers and journalists.

### Investing in Infrastructure

For years, KALW accomplished a great deal with small teams and shoestring budgets. We want to hold onto the resourcefulness and motivation that powered people forward in such an environment, while improving capacity and resources available to them. On average, over 75% of KALW’s annual budget is directed toward programming and training, with 15% toward management/administration and 10% toward fundraising and membership.

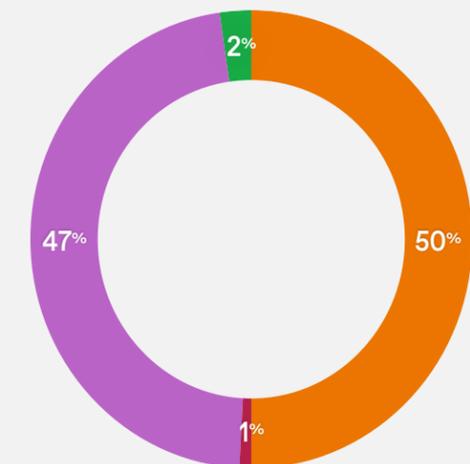
Over the past year, we have focused on building out our administrative infrastructure, adding positions in fundraising, marketing, and operations, and reshaping our leadership structure. In the long term, we plan to further increase investments in programs, partnerships, and production.

### Distributing our Leadership

We use a distributed leadership model, which includes regularly convening a 16-person leadership team representing every department to provide strategic insight, generate connectivity and pathways across our full body of work, and advise executive director James Kass on key issues and opportunities. This approach makes us strong and nimble, able to quickly assess and respond to emerging needs and opportunities across the Bay Area. In the long-term we believe this approach to leadership will create internal pathways for promotion and professional development of emerging talent.

**FY24-25 Revenue**

Individual/Public Support	50%
Sponsorship	1%
Grants	47%
Other Income	2%





We are building a knowledgeable, connected board that complements and builds on the strengths of KALW to meet the future we desire. This past year, we've added six new board members, resulting in a board that currently has 13 members and reflects industry innovators, community and civic leaders, and people possessing a range of professional skill sets and lived experiences.

### Moving Beyond Federal Funding

Public media as a sector is at an inflection point. Every organization in the country is reeling from substantive cuts in public funding, which resulted in KALW losing more than \$400,000 in annual support. We and everyone else in the field are making sense of what it means to be public media without federal funding. It has been a seminal part of our budgets—and our identities—for a long time. But CPB funding was never more important than the support provided by our members, and in this moment when independent media is more important than

ever, we are more aware than ever of how essential individual contributors are to moving us forward. Our members have stepped up in extraordinary ways in 2025, helping close CPB-related gaps while also giving generously to our first-time capital campaign to build the People's Studio.

### Engaging our Community

In the years to come, we promise to build even stronger relationships with our many members. In 2026, we look forward to rolling out new membership levels and engagement opportunities, as well as more information about planned giving opportunities. Our new home at the Warfield Commons will create an unprecedented opportunity to host our community of supporters, partners, and listeners, connect them with their favorite KALW personalities, and expose them more intimately to our work. We will simultaneously continue to pursue opportunities for state and local grants, as well as support from foundations.

## Final Thoughts

All of the shifts and aspirations described in this report have been pursued in service of our community. We believe deeply in the power of the people to shape the places they call home for the better, and we are honored to play a role helping people define the future of the Bay Area. We are so grateful to all the people who have joined us on this journey, contributing time, talent, and resources to helping KALW fulfill its mission. We look forward to opening our doors to the Warfield Commons in 2026, and invite everyone to join us there. It's our future home—and we hope you will feel like it's yours as well.

## Photo Credits

Page 3: James Kass and Minnie Phan look at KALW archival photos. Photos by Bethanie Hines.

Page 5: Warfield Commons rendering by Minnie Phan; bottom left photos by Dante D. Jones; bottom right photo of Jen Chien, Sunni Khalid, and Ben Trefny at the Society of Professional Journalists Awards Ceremony 2025 by Michelle Liu.

Page 7: The People’s Studio rendering by Minnie Phan.

Page 9-12 in order of appearance: photo of KALW staff courtesy of KALW; photo of Jon Carroll, Hana Baba, and David Boyer by Bethanie Hines; photo of 111 Minna courtesy of KALW, photo of Satya by Elygoat; photo of James Kass by Bethanie Hines; photo of KALW event by Dante D. Jones; photo of *Uncuffed* alum T. Chanel “Koi” Bagnerise courtesy of KALW; photo of Greg Eskridge, Earlonne Woods and Brian Gonsoulin at *Uncuffed* Season 4 Wrap Party by Javier Jimenez; photo of Cecilia Lei and Jeff Chang at the *Notes from the Edge* Launch Party courtesy of KALW; photo of Tshego Letsoalo and DJ Juan (Wonway) Amador courtesy of KALW; photo of Ellen Sebastian Chang with The Kitchen Sisters (Nikki Silva & Davia Nelson) courtesy of KALW; photo of KALW development staff by Bethanie Hines; photo of Audio Academy by Bethanie Hines; photo of DJ LadyRyan by Bethanie Hines; photo of Rose Aguilar and Wendy Holcombe at the Warfield Commons by Michelle Liu; The People’s Studio rendering by Minnie Phan.

Page 14-15: Photos of Audio Academy alum by Bethanie Hines.

Page 15: Photo of *Uncuffed* Season 4 Wrap Party by Javier Jimenez.

Page 16: Photo of KALW staff and producers at the Society of Professional Journalists Awards Ceremony 2025 by Michelle Liu; bottom left photos of Warfield Common events by Michelle Liu.

Page 17: Photo of *The Bay Agenda: ICE & the Bay Area — Your Legal Rights* event by Michelle Liu, bottom left photos courtesy of KALW; bottom right photo of Hana Baba and Sunni Khalid by Michelle Liu.

Page 23: Photos of Kevan Vance and Rose Aguilar by Bethanie Hines; bottom photos courtesy of KALW.



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