

NINA MOINI: This week marks the one year since Congress rolled back funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The move left radio stations across the country scrambling to find funding to help cover their communities, stations like KAXE in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

But thanks to a \$4.2 million grant from the Bush Foundation, the Northern Minnesota news station is now planning to expand news coverage, help create an ambassador program, and strengthen partnerships with regional newsrooms. Here to talk to us about the donation and the new station is Sarah Bignall, CEO and General Manager of KAXE. Thanks for being with us, Sarah.

SARAH Thank you so much for having me.

BIGNALL:

NINA MOINI: I bet you were all excited to receive this incredible grant. How long has this been in the works?

SARAH Yes, we were very excited to receive this grant from the Bush Foundation. It was actually kind of a very long process. We first started talking to the Bush Foundation back in the fall of 2024, and we kind of saw the writing on the wall that our funding may be in jeopardy. And so we came together as a team, trying to figure out, how can we diversify our funding and still be able to meet the needs of our communities here in Northern Minnesota?

BIGNALL:

NINA MOINI: So you all were thinking ahead, like many stations were. I mentioned in the top some of the things you're planning to do with the new funding. Can you tell me a little bit about how you decided how to utilize this?

SARAH Yeah. So this investment from the Bush Foundation actually is building on a grant we originally had got from the Blandin Foundation back about four years ago to build out KAXE's first dedicated newsroom. And with that early investment that we got from the Blandin Foundation, we were able to hire in a news director as well as two reporters.

BIGNALL:

And so we got to work, you know? We started covering the communities up here in Northern Minnesota. But what we came to realize, that even though we had expanded our staff, the need for local news in rural communities was very great, and so we needed more people to be able to do that work.

NINA MOINI: Tell us some of the challenges that you run into trying to provide news to these northern communities. You mentioned just staffing can be difficult, but I imagine there's a lot of area to cover.

SARAH Yeah. So the KAXE, and we have another station, KBXE, that has a translator-- a tower over in Bagley. So really, we cover from the Brainerd Lakes area north, and then from Hermantown over to Grand Forks. So we literally are covering all of Northern Minnesota. So geographically, it's very difficult.

BIGNALL:

We believe that our reporters need to live, work, and be present in the communities of Northern Minnesota, because we're the ones that are best suited to be able to tell the stories. We have the connections to the people in the communities because we're living it, right? We know what issues are going on. So identifying the need and knowing that, man, even though we've expanded this capacity, we just don't have enough people to be able to do all the work that's really needed up here.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. You know, sometimes when you go to a community where there isn't a strong local news presence-- I travel the state for my reporting-- people will say, well, you only show up when bad things happen, you know? Or you only show up when this happens, or a weather event happens. Tell us just about the value of having these folks, like you talked about, living in communities. What are the types of stories, the range of stories that you then get to tell?

**SARAH
BIGNALL:** Yeah. And last summer would be a great example of that with the derecho that happened in Bemidji. The larger news outlets throughout the state did a fantastic job covering it, coming in and hitting what happened and the devastation that existed in those communities.

But we as people that are living in these communities, the rebuild is still going on. So KAXE was able to step in with our local reporter, Larissa, that's out of our Bemidji office. She was able to do reporting on, where can people bring tree debris if they have that? What sort of funding prospects and possibilities are for homeowners who maybe need help with cleanup and repair of their homes?

What are community resources? Many people were out without electricity for a long period of time. And so where were cooling stations for people that need it? Were there any kind of housing vouchers for people that maybe needed to stay in hotels while they were having their homes repaired or debris pulled out of their yards? And so we're able to do the local ongoing reporting.

And we even had experts of, so many trees were lost in this event that people were grieving these hundreds-of-year-old trees in their yards that are no longer there. We talked to experts that are saying, grieving a tree is a real thing. It's just providing those local resources to people when they need it most.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. There's the initial event that a lot of folks come in and they cover, but then there's all the recovery and the years after that continue to impact people on this hyper-local level. And I think what's kind of sad is that as we're losing kind of hyper-local newsrooms or local newsrooms, people seem to be craving it even more. Do you talk to your listeners and other people about just, what do they want to know about their community?

**SARAH
BIGNALL:** Yeah, when we started the newsroom, when we were telling our longtime listeners and members that, hey, we're doing this, we've launched this news program, a lot of them are like, but we feel you guys already do that, right? And it's been interesting that we've gotten notes back from people of, we weren't really sure what the need was, but you really helped me through the elections that happened. The midterm elections, I had more information, so I was able to make decisions on people who were running for county and city offices.

Or we've been able to connect the dots with education spending in Northern Minnesota. Most of our school districts are really struggling with funding, and so we've been able to tell stories kind of in a broad way, but bring it very local. And a lot of people are like, I didn't understand what the issue is because at a state level, metro-funded schools are faring much better than the schools are up here.

And when you only have news sources that are more from a broader scope of the state of Minnesota, it's kind of disconnected from the reality that we have here in Northern Minnesota. So that is really what our listeners have appreciated the most, is I actually feel heard and seen in the reporting that's happening, because it's affecting my neighbor or myself.

NINA MOINI: So important. I mentioned at the top about the community ambassador program. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

SARAH

BIGNALL:

Yeah. So as I mentioned, we identified what the need us. And it's really expensive to hire in people, and we knew that that wasn't going to be a forever solution to just continue to add in more and more reporters.

So taking inspiration from the Minneapolis Documenters program, we are launching our first community ambassador program. We selected the city of Deer River, who used to have a newspaper that was located there. And people were really looking for, how do I get information on what's happening with the local city? How do I understand what's happening with the school districts?

So as we've started bridging conversations-- because KAXE, we know a lot of the folks who live in Deer River. Those are our neighbors there. We've been able to connect in with business owners, people within the education system. And they're excited of, how can we help? How can we help provide leads for your news team to be able to help tell those stories?

NINA MOINI:

That was Sarah Bignall, CEO and General Manager of KAXE.