FUND2026
FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING NEW DONORS

July 6, 2026

Executive Summary of Findings from National Donor Research

CITY SQUARE
ASSOCIATES
Data. Meaning. Action.

July 1, 2026

Dear Friends in Public Media,

In the spring of 2025, public television and radio stations across the country witnessed a surge in giving that accompanied the rescission of federal funding for public media. Longtime donors gave more, lapsed donors returned, and — most significantly — large numbers of people made their very first contribution. FUND 2026 was designed to understand who these donors are and why they gave, so that the public media system can convert a singular moment into durable, long-term support.

The study had three goals: to explore the motivations and dynamics behind the observed surge in giving; to develop a detailed demographic, psychographic, and behavioral profile of new and renewed donors that can be used to strengthen the base of financial support for public media stations going forward; and to produce both nationally valid and station-specific insights that can be leveraged for future marketing, communications, and strategic planning.

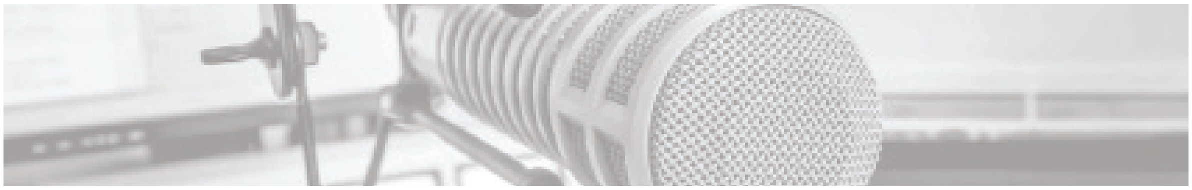
Five central insights have emerged from this work, each carrying a clear strategic implication for how stations engage and retain donors. Those five findings are the structure of executive summary that follows. Although they do not exhaust the sum total of what we learned from the study, they provide a good introduction to a body of research that we hope public media organizations will be able to use for years to come.

We are grateful to the 58 stations who invested in FUND 2026 and shared their donor lists. We are also grateful to Greater Public and CDP who not only sponsored the qualitative phase of the study, but promoted the research when it was first conceived and remain our indispensable partners in socializing the learninng. It is an honor to be partners with them in promoting a more sustainable future for public media.

Sincerely,

The City Square Associates Team

Chris Schiavone, President
Phil Cook, Senior Research Director
Sam Luz, Research Manager
Joel Martinez, Research & Insights Manager



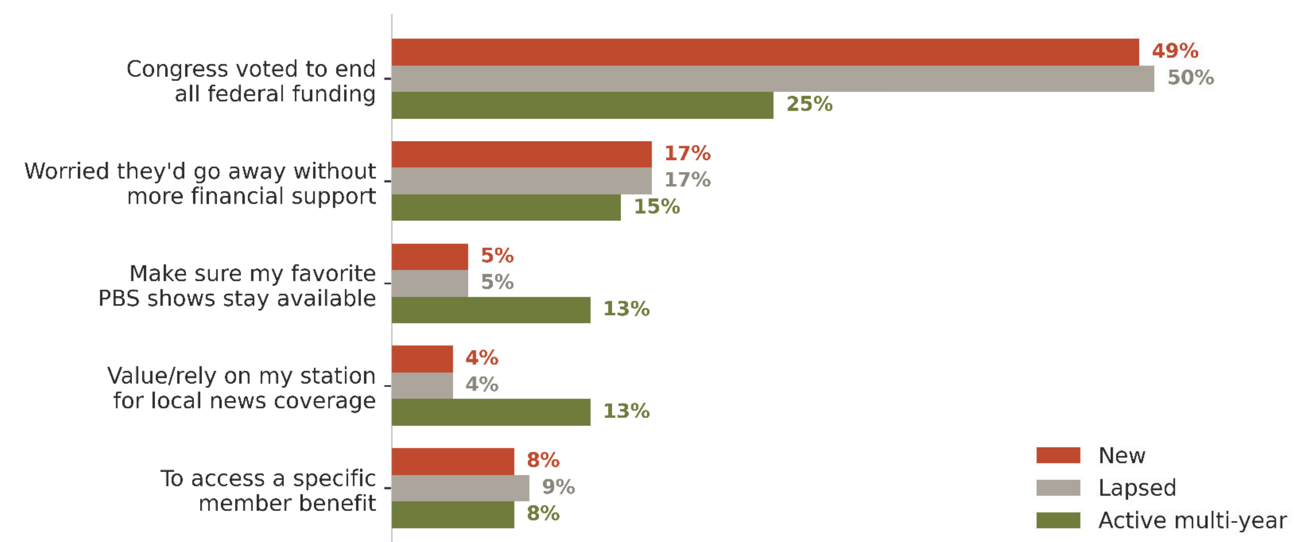
1. The loss of federal funding: a catalyst, not a crisis

The rescission of federal funding was the universal trigger for last year's surge in giving — but for donors, it registered less as a short-term crisis than as a call to action.

The initial anger has matured into a protective, ongoing stance. Donors understand the new reality plainly: the federal dollars are not coming back, and public media now depends on them. As one new donor put it, the decision was simple — "I don't want [public media] to go away, I think we need it" — and another described asking for a donation in place of a Father's Day gift, "especially in the context of the attack on CPB."

The quantitative data leave little doubt about what drove people to give. Asked which single reason had the strongest influence on their decision, donors in every cohort pointed to the same thing: the fact that Congress voted to end all federal funding. That reason was named by roughly half of new donors (49%) and lapsed donors (50%), and by a quarter of active multi-year donors (25%) — far ahead of any other motivation, including worry that stations would disappear, the desire to keep favorite programs on the air, or access to a member benefit. The concentration of a single dominant motive, especially among new and lapsed givers, is striking.

Strongest or only reason for giving last year, by donor segment



Survey question: Of these reasons, which had the strongest influence on your decision to give last year? n = 65,412

Figure 1 - Federal defunding was the strongest motivation in every cohort.

Crucially, the surge looks structural rather than momentary. Among active multi-year donors, 38% reported giving more to public media in 2025 than in prior years, and those who named the defunding as their top or only motivation were markedly more likely to have increased their gift — 55% gave more, compared to 32% of those for whom defunding was not the driver. The connection between the defunding and intensified financial support among the current base is direct.

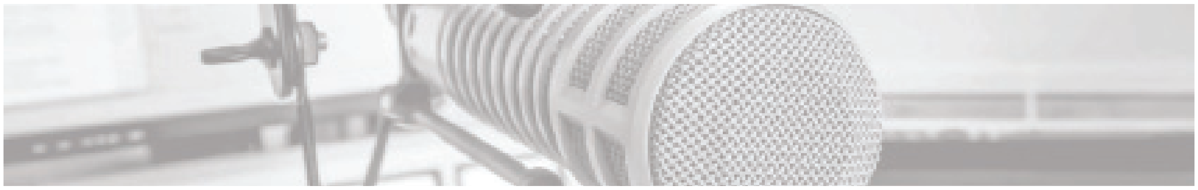
The most important evidence that this is a catalyst rather than a crisis comes from how donors describe the future. Three-quarters (75%) agree that the loss of federal funding is a big part of why they continue to donate — yet only 5% say they would decrease or stop their giving if federal funding were ever restored, while 74% reject that idea outright. The motivation has been internalized as a standing commitment, not a temporary reaction. Likelihood to keep giving is correspondingly high across every segment: 90% of new donors, 91% of lapsed donors, and 94% of active multi-year donors say they are likely or very likely to give again in the coming year.

The data also point to the single most effective way to deepen that commitment. Among donors likely to give again, the top motivator for increasing a gift is simply being told how the federal funding cuts affect their own local station; this was named by more than a third of donors likely to give again, ahead of any discount or tangible benefit. Among the small group who say they are unlikely to give again, the same explanation tops the list (29%). The appetite is not for a better transaction; it is for a clearer understanding of the stakes.

> ***Strategic implication.*** *Frame the moment as a catalyst, not a catastrophe. Name the new reality plainly, and invite donors into a sustained, protective role rather than a one-time rescue. The most powerful message is also the most concrete: explain what the loss of federal funding means for this station, in this community.*

2. New donors, new ways of engaging

New, lapsed, and multi-year donors all share the same underlying values and the same inclination to keep supporting public media well beyond the crisis moment. But they differ in age, life stage, and cultural interests — and therefore in what it will take to keep each of them engaged. The shared values are the common ground; the differences explain why a single, undifferentiated approach to engagement will leave value on the table.



The most fundamental difference is age. The median new donor is 57 years old, compared with 70 for active multi-year donors — a gap of more than a decade. Generationally, 34% of new donors are Millennial or younger, versus just 8% of active multi-year donors. New donors are not a slightly younger version of the existing file; they are a different population at a different stage of life.

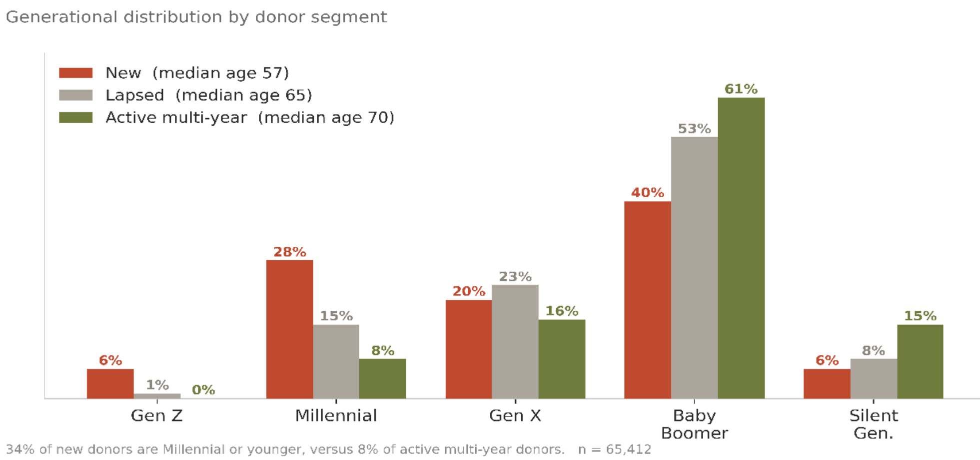


Figure 2. New donors skew significantly younger than the existing donor base.

Life stage follows from age. New donors are nearly twice as likely as active multi-year donors to have school-aged children at home (17% versus 9%), and in the qualitative research, parents pointed to that directly. A 44 year-old new donor to Alabama Public Radio, explained: "I have young kids who almost exclusively watch PBS Kids… I grew up on Sesame Street, and now my kids are watching Daniel Tiger, and I'm acutely aware in this moment that it could go away." New donors are also slightly more racially and ethnically diverse than the existing base. The differences are directional rather than dramatic, but they were vivid in the qualitative work — including a 19 year-old new donor to Twin Cities PBS who arrived in the United States as an immigrant. "My family didn't have much, so we had PBS Kids on 24/7." It was, she said "my main way of learning."

Importantly, these differences do not reflect magnitude of cultural engagement. In fact, donors of all types are equally engaged culturally, with roughly a third of each segment reported participating in eight or more of the cultural activities the survey asked about over the prior year. What varies by donor segment is the *kind* of activity. Indexed against active multi-year donors, new donors over-index on road races, state and county fairs, live comedy, food and beverage festivals, zoos and aquariums, and live sporting events, and under-index on live theater, events at a house of worship, and public lectures or forums. The cultural participation is just as strong; it simply points in a different direction.

New donors also give to fewer causes overall. More than a third of active multi-year donors (35%) contributed to seven or more different causes in 2025, compared with just 18% of both new and lapsed donors. Because the income profiles of the segments are similar, this is unlikely to be a matter of affordability; it more plausibly reflects life stage. The competing financial demands of a household with children may outweigh philanthropic priorities. The implication is that a new donor's public media gift may represent a more deliberate, values-driven choice from a shorter list, which is all the more reason to reinforce it.

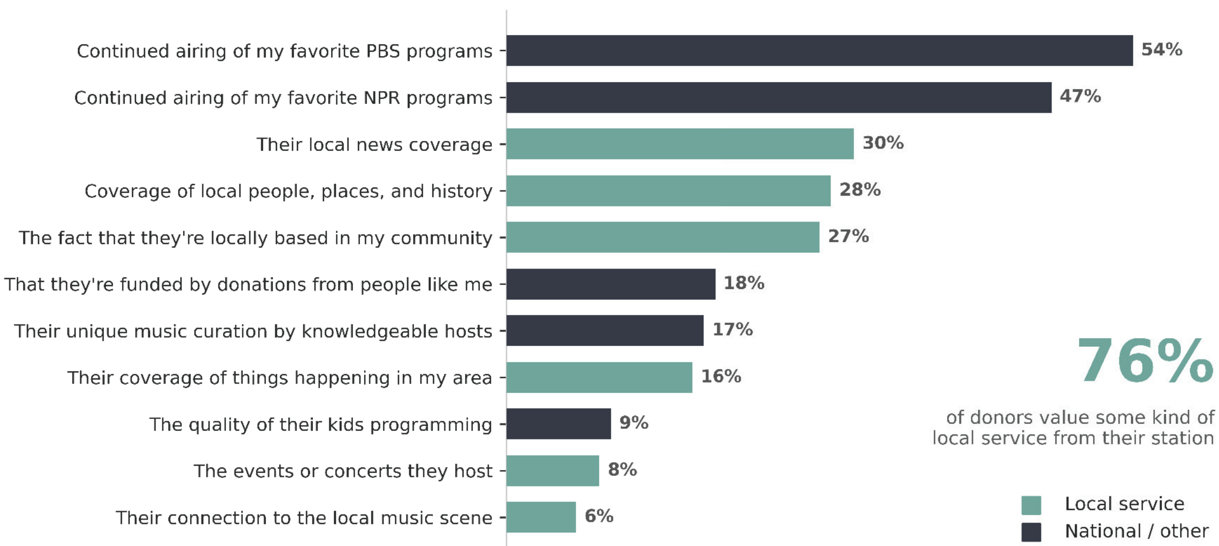
> ***Strategic implication.*** *Lead with the shared values that unite all donors, but tailor the engagement and retention approach to each segment's life stage and interests. The same values can be expressed through very different programming, events, and channels depending on whether the audience is a retired Boomer or a Millennial parent.*

3. Localism matters

Community connection is itself a driver of giving. Even donors who are devoted to national programming want more local — more local news and information, more awareness of what is already available to them, and a station that shows up in the civic life of the community well beyond the broadcast.

Public media development has traditionally led with the national content produced by NPR and PBS; the data make clear that this is only part of the story. When donors were asked to choose the three things they value most about their station, the continued airing of favorite PBS (54%) and NPR (47%) programs sat at the top, as expected. But the picture changes when the locally oriented options are added together. Local services on the list included: local news coverage; coverage of local people, places, and history; the fact that the station is based in their own community; coverage of things happening in their area; locally hosted events. Just over three quarters of all donors selected one or more of these local services as being among the most valuable to them. In other words, taken together, what the station does locally is even more widely valued than the national content that anchors most messaging.

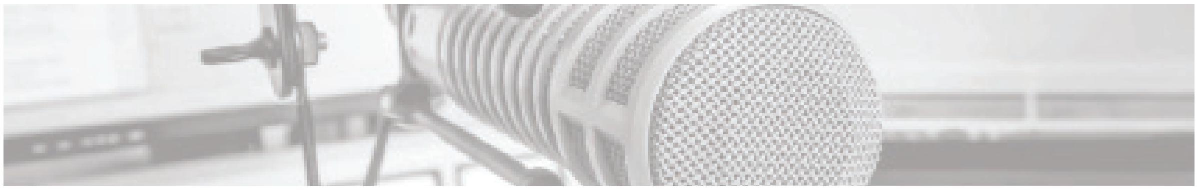
Top three things donors say they value most about their station



Survey question: Which THREE of the following do you value most about what they provide or represent? n = 65,412

Figure 3 - Local service is the most widely valued thing donors receive from their station.

The same preference shows up when donors look ahead. Asked what their station should focus more on in the future, 55% called for more of some kind of local service — led by promoting locally focused content alongside the national programs (37%), covering more of what is happening in the community (15%), and organizing opportunities to volunteer locally (13%). More than a quarter of respondents wrote in their own answer, a sign of how engaged and opinionated these supporters are. A topic model of those open-text responses found that



news coverage and journalism was the single largest substantive theme, with donors asking their stations to help fill the gap left by the decline of local journalism — "hyper-local news… left to community newspapers and word of mouth," and "state and local news that aren't being covered by big media." Another cluster called for more local music and arts: locally produced shows, drawing on local musical institutions, and launching the careers of young local artists.

The custom questions that individual stations added to their surveys reinforced the pattern. At Colorado Public Radio, the leading reason donors gave for their support was that it is "a source of local news that I trust" (81%), followed by its important role in the civic life of Colorado (56%) and in their own community (47%). At Cascade PBS in the Pacific Northwest, donors asked for more programs about local places, people, and activities (25%), more in-depth coverage of local issues and government (23%), and conversations featuring local experts and community voices (20%). In the Northwest as in Colorado, local is more than news — it is stories, voices, and live events.

> ***Strategic implication.*** *Invest visibly in local: expand local content and information, partner with local civic organizations, and serve the community in ways that extend past the airwaves — and be explicit that you are doing so. Many stations already do this work; the opportunity lies in making it known.*

4. Giving is empowering

Donors believe their gifts genuinely matter. For many, learning how their dollars were used during the crisis turned helplessness into empowerment — a sense that, in an uncertain moment, they could actually do something. They see giving not as a one-time gesture but as a meaningful, repeatable action that helps improve the world. In the qualitative research, donors framed it in exactly those terms: "2025 said to me… that it's now time to stand up and be counted," and giving was a way to support "media and journalism of that independent nature" against what one donor called an attempt to "dampen and quiet a vital voice in our country."

This is why giving is not, for these donors, exclusively — or even primarily — about the content. Nearly half of all donors (49%) agree they support public media's mission even though they do not consume a lot of its content — and that figure rises to 58% among both new and lapsed donors. The commitment is to what public media stands for. Ninety-four percent agree that public media is an essential part of a free and independent press, and 90% that it plays an important role in supporting local arts, culture, and music. A gift, in other words, is a way to stand up for what they believe.

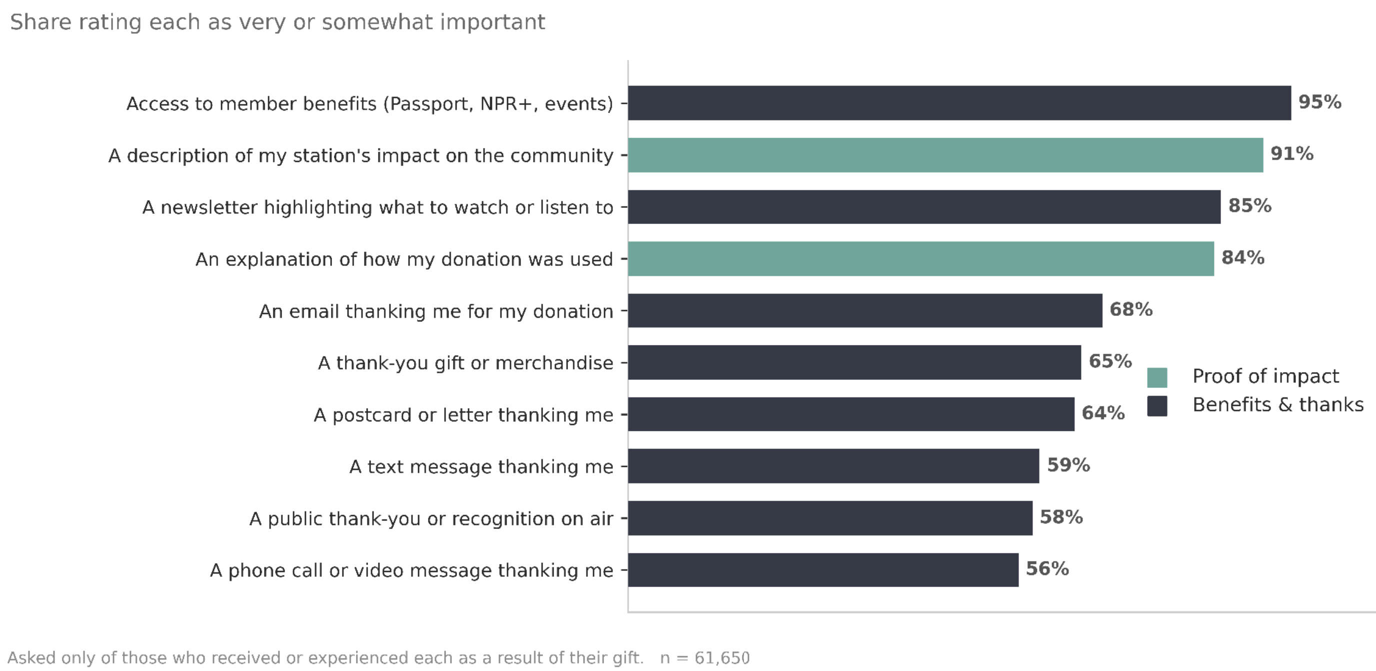
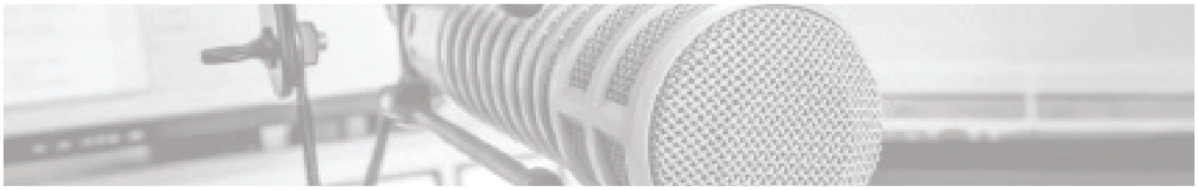


Figure 4 - Proof of impact ranks just below member benefits in importance to donors.

If giving is an expression of values, then donors want evidence that those values are being served — and the data show that proof of impact is now valued almost as highly as the benefits stations have traditionally offered. Among donors rating how important various forms of follow-up are, access to member benefits like Passport and NPR+ ranks first (95% very or somewhat important), but a description of the station's impact on the local community (91%) and an explanation of how the donation was used (84%) rank just behind it — ahead of every form of thank-you, gift, or acknowledgement.

The pattern holds, and intensifies, among major donors (defined in this study as those who reported giving at least $1,200 to public media in 2025). Asked what would most affect their decision to keep supporting, they pointed to partnerships with local community organizations that matter to them (62%), the station investing in an initiative or content focus they are personally passionate about (59%), and a clear and detailed impact report showing how their gift makes a difference (57%). Notably, these substantive, mission-aligned actions far outranked the more conventional perks of major-donor cultivation — exclusive events (39%), meeting on-air talent (39%), or meeting the station's chief executive (22%). Even at the top of the giving pyramid, impact beats access.

> ***Strategic implication.*** *Close the loop. Show concretely how contributions were used and what they made possible, and invite continued giving as meaningful action that lets people express their values in the world. Proof of impact is not a nicety for these donors; it is a benefit in its own right.*



5. A town, not a country club

For donors, public media is more like a town than a country club. They have a sense of ownership — "public media is ours" — and they see themselves as part of a community connected by certain values: truth, independence, and access. More than any specific benefit they might hope to attain through membership, their donation reflects how they see themselves and the kind of world they want to live in. In the interviews, the language was telling: donors spoke of feeling "connected to people, even though I might not know them," of fellow supporters and on-air hosts as "my friends," and, stating simply, "we are a friendship."

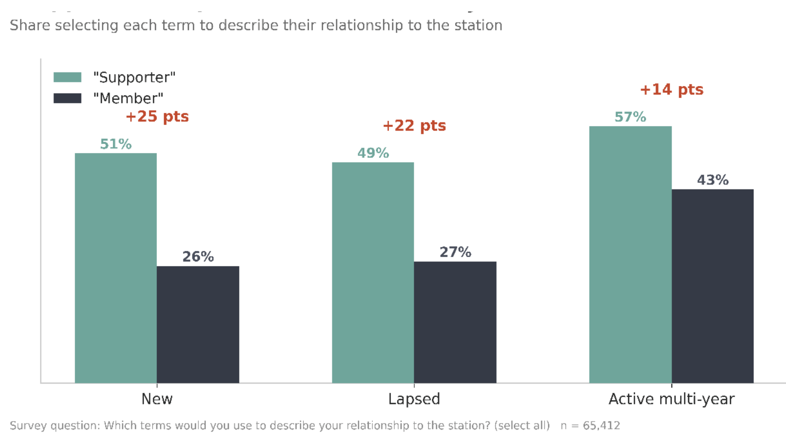


Figure 5 - "Supporter" outpolls "member" in every cohort.

That self-understanding shows up clearly in the words donors choose. Asked which terms describe their relationship to their station, donors gravitated to "supporter" far more than to "member" — the word the system most often uses. "Supporter" outpolled "member" in every segment, and the gap was widest precisely where it matters most for growth: new donors preferred "supporter" by 25 points, lapsed donors by 22, and even active multi-year donors by 14. This is not an argument to abandon the language of membership, but it is a clear signal that people experience their giving as actively supporting something they believe in and expanding access to *all*, not just to those who are "paying members."

The town metaphor is reinforced by where new donors actually came from. They were not, for the most part, strangers drawn in by the headlines: 70% of new donors say that before their first gift they were already regularly engaged with the station — they had simply never donated before. They were already citizens of the town; the rescission of federal funding was the catalyst that moved them from participation to support. That continuity is good news, because it means the new donor base is built on existing relationships rather than fleeting attention.

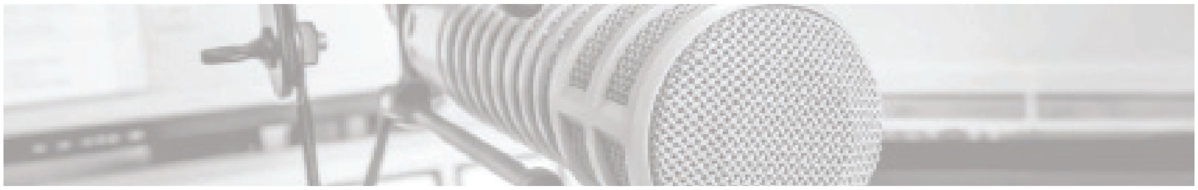
Finally, if donors see themselves as members of a community rather than parties to a transaction, then how they are treated matters as much as what they receive. The data show a strong correlation between how appreciated donors felt for their gift last year and how likely they are to give again: 80% of those who felt "very much" appreciated are very likely to give again, compared with 53% of those who did not feel appreciated at all. Appreciation is not a courtesy; it is a driver of retention, and it works precisely because it affirms a relationship rather than rewarding a purchase.

> ***Strategic implication.*** *Speak to ownership and identity, not just services. Reinforce the programs and values donors connect to, frame giving as an expression of who they are and the society they are helping to sustain, and treat appreciation as a core part of the relationship rather than as a formality.*

Conclusion

The rescission of federal funding did not merely prompt an emergency response; it awakened a sense of ownership among people who already valued public media, and it gave them a way to act on their values at a time when they may have otherwise felt powerless. The donors who responded — especially the new ones — are younger, are at a different life stage, and engage with culture and community in their own way, but they are bound to longtime supporters by the same convictions about a free press, local connection, and the public good. They give because it means something, they want to see that it matters, and they think of themselves as supporters of a shared enterprise rather than members of an exclusive club.

The strategic implications point in one direction. Name the new reality and invite donors into a lasting, protective role; lead with shared values while tailoring engagement to each segment; invest visibly in local service; close the loop on impact; and speak to identity, ownership, and appreciation. Done together, these strategies can turn a remarkable moment of giving into a durable foundation of future support.



FUND2026
FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING NEW DONORS

This research initiative was spearheaded by City Square Associates, Inc., and jointly funded by 58 local public media organizations across the country. Greater Public and CDP provided technical support and sponsored the qualitative phase of research.

The central component of the research was a national online survey, fielded by email in March 2026 to an aggregated list of new, lapsed, and long-term donors drawn from all 58 participating stations, which yielded 65,412 responses from across the country. The survey was followed by a qualitative drilldown in April and May of 2026 — a series of hour-long interviews and small focus groups with a total of 50 donors who opted in during the survey. The qualitative conversations give voice and texture to the patterns in the quantitative data, and donors are quoted throughout this summary.

Analysis is organized around four donor segments. Brand-new donors contributed for the first time ever in 2025. Deep-lapsed donors returned in 2025 after a lapse of five years or more, and recently lapsed donors returned after a shorter absence. Active multi-year donors — the comparison group — made their first contribution before 2025 and have given consistently since. Segments are defined by how respondents described themselves in the survey rather than by their CRM tags; on that basis the sample is 13% new, 15% lapsed (combining both deep and recently lapsed donors), and 72% active multi-year. The participating organizations span joint licensees (45%), radio licensees (37%), and television stations (18%), and a balanced mix of large, mid-size, and smaller markets, so that no single market size dominates the findings.

PHOTO CREDITS

COVER - top left - Louisville Public Media
COVER - top right - Michigan Learning Channel
COVER - bottom - Adobe Stock
Page 1 - Adobe Stock
Page 2 - KVIE - Sacramento, CA
Page 4 - Ocean State Media - Providence, RI
Page 5 - KVIE - Sacramento, CA
Page 7 - New Hampshire Public Radio
Page 8 - New Hampshire Public Radio

Participating Organizations

We are deeply grateful to the 58 local public media organizations that sponsored this research and provided access to their donor lists. We are also grateful to Greater Public and CDP for promoting the research, sponsoring the qualitative component, and helping us to socialize the findings.

90.9 WRCJ
Alabama Public Radio
Alaska Public Media
Blue Ridge Public Radio
Boise State Public Radio
Cascade PBS
Classical California (KUSC/KDFC)
Classical WSMR
Colorado Public Radio
Detroit PBS
GBH
Georgia Public Broadcasting
Hawaii Public Radio
Houston Public Media
KASU
KERA
KNBA
KOSU
KPBS
KQED
KUER / PBS Utah
KUOW
KUT News and KUTX 98.9
LAist
Louisville Public Media
Maryland Public Television
Michigan Public
Minnesota Public Radio
Montana PBS
New Hampshire PBS
NHPR
Nine PBS
Ocean State Media
PBS KVIE
PBS Reno
PBS SoCal
Pittsburgh Community Broadcasting
Public Radio East
Rocky Mountain PBS / KUVO JAZZ
SDPB
THIRTEEN
Twin Cities PBS
VPM
WABE
WCMU Public Media
WDAV
WETA
WFYI & WBAA Public Media
WGVU Public Media
WHUT
WHYY
Wisconsin PBS
WJCT Public Media
WKNO Public Media
WMHT Public Media
WNYC
WPR
WQXR
WRTI
WUSF
WUWM
WYSO

CDP
More for your mission.

GREATER PUBLIC

CITY SQUARE ASSOCIATES
Data. Meaning. Action.

402 Cambridge Street • Cambridge, MA 02141 • 617-441-7733 • www.citysquareassociates.com