



Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute  
Missouri School of Journalism  
Columbia, Missouri

# Proposal

## Report for America: The national service corps for news.

### **Title of project:**

Report for America: The national service corps for news. Adding feet on the streets for accountability journalism in partnership with media and the public. <http://www.reportforamerica.us>

**1. Proponent:** [Bill Densmore](#)

**2. Organization:** [Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute](#), Columbia, Mo.

**3. Interim Website:** <http://www.reportforamerica.us>

**4. Completion period:** 12-to-18 months

### **5. Describe the project**

Report for America (RFA) will execute a one-year trial in three U.S. communities to determine feasibility of a national rollout. RFA is a non-profit national service corps, similar to the '30s-era National Writers Project, City Year or Teach for America. It will select talented college graduates, retirees, career-changers or other promising candidates for a service year within non-profit and for-profit news organizations to report important civic issues. An independent, advisory panel of editors and citizens will advise and monitor their efforts to ensure focus on problems and opportunities in local communities that may lead to community-initiated solutions.

RFA fellows will be selected based upon (a) demonstrated journalism competence, measured by experience or degree; or, (b) professional expertise in such fields as education, public health, criminal justice, law, science, technology and accounting that would support journalism practice. They will convene for a week of training before host/community placements. They will learn or hone multimedia, data-driven reporting skills, becoming familiar with Web-based collaboration and tools for coordinating the voice and impact of their reporting, transferring expertise to field hosts. In the field, they will take direction from their host institutions, providing talent and expertise at long-form, research and issue-based reporting.

RFA work will be "open source" -- publicly available on the Web. It will be sponsored and promoted by blogs, local online news organizations and traditional mainstream media outlets. It may be reviewed after publication by the independent panel -- to address issues of accuracy or bias, or to provide professional review of the reporting to assist the public in judging its trustworthiness.

## **6. How will your project improve the way news and information is delivered to geographic communities?**

Fact-based, independent, watchdog journalism is adrift, with decreasing commercial support. To help, public radio/TV and the nascent Investigative News Network use existing institutions or create non-profits. RFA will supplement by managing a national service corps of trained journalists in fellowships at existing, community news organizations (print, cable, Web, broadcast) – sharing with them and their communities assistance, knowledge, resources and training about the best technology tools in data-driven, computational journalism. RFA provides public-interest journalism funding without funding specific journalism organizations or agendas. RFA permits propagation of technology and collaboration tools by example rather than by dictates.

## **7. How is your idea innovative (new or different from what already exists)?**

Journalism schools and mid-career training to enhance skills were appropriate when the practice of journalism was bounded by relatively elite, financially secure mainstream news outfits. Now the practice of journalism is unbounded. As a result, two generations -- industry-entering Millennials (18-31) and industry-displaced Baby Boomers (47-65) -- are increasingly interested in unbounded journalism as a community-changing act of service. RFA, uniquely, allows them to apply their service to short, focused commitment around topics such as tech and social innovation, climate change, news-literacy education, health and education policy or cultural diversity. RFA will do vital recruitment and training, building interest in national service.

## **8. What experience do you or your organization have to successfully develop this project?**

Bill Densmore was a 2008-2009 Reynolds Journalism Institute fellow and has experience running grant-funded projects and events. From 1983-1992 he published weekly newspapers in Berkshire County, Mass. From 1994-2001 he conceived and developed Clickshare Service Corp., a web-based, shared-user network for Internet information commerce. Densmore was a member of the 2005 Annenberg Commission on the Role of the Press in a Democracy. As founder-editor of the Media Giraffe Project (MGP), he has interviewed hundreds of individuals making innovative use of media to foster participatory democracy and community.

About Densmore: <http://newshare.typepad.com/about.html> )

Report for America will be administered by Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism, and will work in collaboration with the Media Giraffe Project at the University of Massachusetts Amherst We've confirmed three hosts for a trial-year assignment of fellows – the Memphis Commercial Appeal (for coverage of race and urban poverty) the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (for coverage of the changing face of rural and agricultural America) and the Boston-based, Spanish-language daily El Planeta (for coverage of immigration, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and workforce training issues). See: <http://www.newshare.com/rfa/hosts.html>

We have consulted with the media-reform group FreePress.net and will seek participation in RFA by journalism associations and schools. Host communities will be expected to help underwrite some of fellowship costs.

## **9. What unmet need does your proposal answer?**

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities said a healthy democracy requires an abundant supply of news so that citizens can make informed judgments. Structural

changes in the news business have cost the United States thousands of feet-on-the-street journalists in the last several years, especially from urban legacy media. There is an urgent need to identify, research and experiment with new methods for replacing that portion of the lost reporting corps that exposed to the public – and assessed -- the work of important civic and government institutions. RFA is a mission-focused approach to sustaining the values, principles and purposes of journalism. It is method and platform neutral.

#### **10. What tasks/benchmarks need to be accomplished to develop your project and by when will you complete them?**

1. Two months (after funding): Identify additional funders including community foundations; connect with RJI and Knight.
2. Three months: Establish advisory board and appropriate partner roles
  - Carnegie-Knight News 21 – Jody Brannon – In discussion about how journalism schools might assist RFA fellows recruitment, and supply advisors on coverage topics and reporting.
  - Investigative News Network – Charles Lewis, Bill Buzenberg and Houston expressed enthusiastic support for RFA. Houston introduced Wisconsin Reporting Project as a pilot host. RFA could recruit INN staffers; INN could suggest RFA reporting topics.
  - The Uptake Institute -- Discussed with Jason Barnett using their processes of developing news teams and managing multiple, independent sites.
  - Northwestern Medill School – Apprising Mary Nesbitt of grant progress; they have registered the “ReportforAmerica.org” domain.
  - FreePress.net -- Met with Josh Stearns to tap his experience in national and community service programs.
  - Scripps-Howard Newspapers – Chris Peck, Memphis Commercial Appeal editor, co-originated Report for America concept, will seek other Scripps Howard papers as RFA hosts.
  - Federal Trade Commission – Susan DeSanti at the FTC and Susan Crawford in the White House reviewed early RFA drafts. Will consult on appropriate agencies roles.
  - Outreach planned to: Investigative Reporters and Editors; American Society of News Editors; local online news and community entrepreneurs.
3. Four months: Develop operational approaches to:
  - Choosing volunteer fellows
  - Soliciting hosts (papers/radio/NGOs/new media/local foundations)
  - Establishing host expectations
  - Vetting communities, securing community-foundation support
  - Identifying, executing reporting topics
  - Sourcing volunteer/host training
  - Securing health insurance/payroll for volunteers
  - Journalism-school relationships

- Public funding
- Public outreach

4. Six to eight months: Rolling launches of three RFA host sites

## **11. What will you have changed by the end of your project?**

The mission of the Report for America project is to put feet on the ground for public-interest journalism. We will do this through new partnerships among foundations, non-governmental organizations, business, legacy and new media organizations. These partnerships will welcome citizens with diverse expertise ready to contribute a professional year of service to fostering government and public transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and effectiveness. They will do this by working in teams, which respect and practice the values, principles and purposes of journalism.

At the end of 18 months we intend to show that:

- Americans understand the importance of the independent, fact-based information gathering and analysis and are prepared to support and participate when asked by a credible, authoritative, mission-based organization.
- Legacy media organizations can host and increase the capacity of civic-journalism efforts, helping them adjust to the new news ecosystem.
- New media can amplify and diversify traditional methods of journalism when combined with appropriately trained volunteer fellows.
- New information technologies, including social networks and semantic-web analysis, can facilitate granular reporting efforts at the community level, yet also foster trend- and issue-analysis that illuminates and guides national policies.
- An independent, non-profit initiative could be an appropriate recipient of public funding for journalism as an important “public good.”

As a result, we hope to change the perception that the contribution of American journalism to participatory democracy is in permanent decline, and replace it with a new sense of opportunity and optimism – and a new mechanism for the public to help.

## **12. How will you measure progress and ultimately success?**

We’ll judge ultimate success as the public recognizes journalism’s role in participatory democracy can be undertaken by us all, as an exercise of civic responsibility, and philanthropy sees that professional expertise and citizen commitment can enable “feet on the street for journalism.”

Progress benchmarks:

- Three pilot locations each produce at least three ground-breaking, fact-based, researched reports in multimedia formats using multidisciplinary teams including reporters and experts in such fields as education, public health, criminal justice, law, science, technology and accounting.
- For-profit news organizations embrace and value RFA not as a method to obtain quality journalism at low cost, but as a source of expertise, training and ideas to help navigate the

new news ecology.

- RFA is seen as a premier opportunity for college graduates, retirees, career-changing and sabbatical workers to “vote with their feet” for participatory democracy. There should be at least 100 applicants to participate in 10 sites in during 2011-2012.
- Community foundations in at least 10 U.S. regions commit to funding Report for America host sites.
- The Knight Foundation is joined by at least one other national foundation to increase the number of RFA host sites and volunteers.
- One or more government agencies and free-press/First Amendment groups collaborate to identify ways public support can assist RFA as it has Teach for America and VISTA.
- At least three of the nation’s well-known journalism schools guide the recruitment and selection of RFA volunteer fellows and interns.

### **13. Do you see any risk in the development of your project?**

Risks and mitigation strategies:

1. **Multiple organizations may compete.** A fabulous outcome would be more entities fostering public-interest reporting. Short term, RFA could be delayed or derailed by competing similar initiatives. The RFA concept – feet on the street for American journalism – has been proposed by others. We welcome and will reach out to them and include them in our planning and execution.
2. **We’ll have underestimated necessary costs.** As we proceed through the grant process, we will turn to careful assessment and consultation to ensure sufficient resources to realistically test RFA.
3. **Donor fatigue will set in after a few years.** We will identify broad bases of support and innovative funding mechanisms. The challenge of supporting RFA is ultimately that of supporting news and journalism as a “public good.”
4. **Our reporting will be seen as ideologically biased.** We make choices about what to cover, and how. The values, principles and purposes underlying those decisions shall be transparently expressed, subject to review and change, and not dictated by ideology, private purpose or economic gain.
5. **Our volunteer fellows will be perceived as “under compensated.”** RFA volunteer fellows will receive stipends. But they must accept their work as an act of service. As a result, no volunteer will be asked to serve for more than one year. Our goal is that RFA volunteer fellows enhance, rather than replace, the work of paid professionals.
6. **Our reporting will be subject to errors of fact or interpretation.** Some RFA volunteer fellows could be journalism-educated but professionally inexperienced. We will establish fact-checking and editing safeguards to ensure trustworthy work. Where possible, we will place two-person teams with complementary skills.

### **14. What is your marketing plan? How will people learn about what you are doing?**

Our marketing and outreach is aimed at the sources and recipients of RFA services. To achieve these marketing objectives, we'll equip our volunteer fellows with the knowledge and tools necessary to act as emissaries for RFP in their post-project work and lives.

- 1. Volunteer fellows.** We will communicate by email and personal contact, via professional networks such as AEJMC to make journalism students, outstanding liberal-arts graduates, news-industry retirees and career-changing or sabbatical-taking professionals aware of RFA opportunities. We expect to use online video-sharing sites for testimonial-like appeals and requests for help from communities and NGOs.
- 2. Host organizations and communities.** We'll connect with municipal trade organizations, the American Society of News Editors, RTNDA, and new-media groups such as Journalism That Matters collaborative, and the Online News Association to solicit applications from RFA host's sites.

When we've demonstrated operational success, we'll work on public outreach to:

- Schools, businesses and non-governmental organizations that can provide resources and volunteers to assist with reporting.
- Community foundations and individuals as potential funders.
- Public officials and elected representatives, to ascertain whether or not they feel RFA is helping to improve citizen participation in politics and civic affairs.

An integral part of completing RFA projects will be to document their reach and impact, the degree to which volunteer fellows feel they have "made a difference" by contributing a year of service. This documentation, and testimonials acquired as a routine part of our work, will contribute to an emerging body of evidence about the importance of journalism in fostering healthy communities.

#### **15. Is this a one-time experiment or do you think it will continue after the grant?**

RFA is intended to establish a service that persists at least while there is a U.S. market failure in provisioning of independent, fact-based, civic journalism. If a market-based solution emerges, RFA as a specific initiative could end, but would be judged a success if it had helped change public policy and buttressed the view that robust journalism is vital to participatory democracy. There may be other institutions that emerge as more capable of creating an alliance among legacy media, new media, foundations, philanthropy, government and the public — and of modulating the current overly binary and ideological debate over public support for journalism.

RFA will continue after the grant if we have successfully collaborated with the multiple constituencies earlier referenced, and if the work of our pilot phase fellows enters the public consciousness.

One of the key outcomes for RFA members (and communities, partners and the field of journalism writ large) will be to transform journalists and a committed core of other citizens into advocates for rigorous quality journalism. Journalism needs advocates—be they citizens with non-journalism day jobs, or media CEOs who retain a passion for public-service reporting, computer programmers working with data, or young entrepreneurs who start new journalism websites and organizations. RFA can be an experience around which the best and brightest can come together and develop their skills, ideas, values, passions -- and ultimately develop as leaders to help chart a new course for journalism.

## **16. If it is to be self-sustainable, what is the plan for making this happen**

RFA will last if its work captures the imagination of citizens and meets their information needs. Beyond that, RFA will need to promote and participate in experiments such as Kachingle and Spot.us that make it easy for people to support news they care about. We intend to pursue the following program-related avenues for revenue:

- RFA expects host institutions and communities to provide a significant match to RFP's national resources, through grants, stipends and taxable, non-cash support for housing, transportation, and meals. For-profit publications may consider an opt-in subscription add-on to raise their match.
- RFA-generated content will be prominently branded, with links and outreach that offer member benefits in exchange for public support, with a portion credited to the community host matching obligation. Member benefits similar to those offered by AARP or AAA are possible.
- On both local and national levels, RFA will invite local individuals, foundations and businesses to sponsor reporting and training. Locally, such underwriting will likely be of a nature and duration not supporting any specific reporting. Nationally, it can include long-term support for ongoing, topical initiatives (with firmly contractual and explicitly disclosed "firewalling" of the sponsors' influence over story selection and preparation).
- RFA will develop a fee-based recruitment/training service utilizing RFA's volunteer applicant and host pool.
- RFA will seek legislation to extend student-loan reductions to RFA service.
- RFA will follow discussions of, and where appropriate advocate, for, additional means of public funding for the practice of independent, civic journalism that advances participatory democracy.

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