



CALIFORNIA
HEALTHCARE
FOUNDATION

The Center for California Health Care Journalism: A Prototype

The Project

The California HealthCare Foundation is testing the potential of supporting the “Center for California Health Care Journalism,” a new concept in health care journalism creation and distribution. During a six-month period a staff of journalists, working under the auspices of the USC Annenberg School for Communication, will collaborate with California media outlets to create and distribute explanatory journalism on important issues of health care and health care policy. At the end of this prototype phase, the Foundation, Center staff, media partners, and journalism experts will assess whether this model of reporting has proven feasible. If the answer is positive, CHCF will consider long-term funding of the Center.

Project Background

Traditional journalism is in turmoil. Confronted with the rapid transformation of information delivery systems from newsprint and broadcast media to the Internet, traditional news organizations are caught between their investors’ demands for high returns and shrinking advertising revenues. In response, newsrooms are cutting costs by jettisoning staff, including the most experienced—and costly—specialized reporters. In the last year, dozens of health care journalists have been let go or transferred to other beats. Others have abandoned the field entirely.

Many news organizations no longer have the time and resources needed to produce the explanatory stories that are of the highest value to their readers. At the same time, a growing number of people

in government, industry, and the health care professions who count on the media to inform the public say that it is becoming difficult to find journalists with enough subject expertise to produce sophisticated reporting.

This shakeout is occurring at a time when health care has become a top concern of the American public—particularly for those who follow the news. A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that health and medicine ranks as one of the subjects most sought after by newspaper readers. Some 77 percent said they “spend a lot of time” reading health and medical news, a level of attention which far outpaced that devoted to stories about business, sports, or entertainment. Health care affordability issues are increasingly linked to worries about the economy, a subject that is rapidly eclipsing all others on the national stage.

Editors and reporters are just as frustrated. They know full well that the general public has a strong appetite for reading about health care policy issues—particularly when they are presented in a compelling and meaningful way. As one news manager at a major California daily put it, “Every time we run these types of stories, we get a big response.”

The Prototype

Many new models for producing journalism are being developed in response to this upheaval, and the potential for Foundation-supported reporting is being widely discussed. Some efforts are already underway. After a six-month study, CHCF decided

PROJECT OVERVIEW

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that there is a need for in-depth, high-quality health care journalism in California, and has funded this experiment to determine if the time is ripe for a Foundation-backed effort to help support and improve health care reporting in the state. Rather than underwrite the operations of established news organizations, the Foundation will fund a dedicated, independent reporting and editing staff to collaborate with traditional and online media organizations to pursue the types of explanatory, issue-based stories that California media are having difficulties producing on their own. To publish this work, project staff will collaborate with three types of media companies: an individual newspaper, a newspaper chain, and at least one radio or television broadcaster, as well as their respective online operations.

The project is being led by Professor Michael Parks, former director of the USC Annenberg School for Communications. Parks is the Pulitzer Prize-winning former editor-in-chief of the *Los Angeles Times*. Parks will be responsible for recruiting the team's staff, building media partnerships, and shepherding the projects to completion.

ABOUT THE FOUNDATION

CHCF has a well-established reputation as a non-partisan innovator in health care news and information. In 1998, the Foundation launched *California Healthline*, an electronic news summary service that chronicles daily developments in health care policy and practice. Two years later, CHCF initiated publication of *iHealthBeat*, whose stories examine the intersection between information technology and health care for a national and international audience.

An essential part of CHCF's purpose is to inform and educate Californians about the mechanics of the state's health care system: how it functions, how well it is working, and the effects it has on the lives of people around the state. The Foundation is committed to providing such information to a wide array of groups interested in the health of health care in California, including policymakers, industry leaders, the health care workforce, researchers, and the public. For more information on CHCF, visit us online at www.chcf.org.