

# Illinois Answers Project

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CASE STUDY | OCTOBER 2023





**Creating clear vision propels  
nonprofit Illinois Answers Project  
to results**

Solutions journalism, impact-tracking differentiate Illinois Answers from other news organizations in Chicago area

### **What communities does Illinois Answers Project serve, and what's a brief history of the news organization?**

The Illinois Answers Project joined Northwestern University's Medill Local News Accelerator at the perfect time. The brand was about six months old, having been reborn in November 2022 from the Better Government Association's newsroom with a focus on solutions journalism. A nonprofit organization serving Chicago and Illinois, the BGA grew over 100 years, with an advocacy arm and a respected newsroom dedicated to investigative work. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 2022 for local reporting with the Chicago Tribune on Chicago's failure to enforce building and fire-safety codes. To separate the advocacy branch of the BGA from its journalism, the newsroom created the Illinois Answers Project brand with a new focus on solutions journalism. The newsroom's shift to a solutions-focused journalism framework was still in its infancy at the start of the Local News Accelerator, and leadership wanted to clearly define the brand.

### **What problem was the Illinois Answers Project trying to solve in the Local News Accelerator, and why was solving the problem strategically important to the organization?**

Illinois Answers Project leaders initially thought they would focus on sustainability and membership. But almost immediately, they pivoted because they couldn't create a membership model before understanding their audience. First, they needed data about the people who needed their work. Second, they needed a clear internal vision statement and an external value proposition. Third, they needed to deliver exceptional journalism with a focus on solutions. Meanwhile, the newsroom had lost some experienced journalists. Some newer staff didn't have the experience creating journalism with impact, and "big J" journalism was what drove their revenue from donors and foundations. The move to focus on audience research and investigative, in-depth journalism told through a solutions lens would align the newsroom with its mission.

**Which of the key pillars of the Local News Accelerator helped Illinois Answers Project the most? (Research and insights, content strategy, business strategy, product development, leadership.)**

- 1. Research and insights** were key to understanding how best to grow and serve its audience. Illinois Answers Project leaders were excited at the possibility of the Northwestern/ Medill-sponsored research, and they also committed to continuing to study the fledgling brand. They plan to do annual or semi-annual audience research beginning in early 2024. The work they did with experts at Northwestern/Medill helped them learn best practices for a survey. In the Medill Enterprise Sustainability Assessment, which is a self-assessment of 60 competencies fielded among team members at the beginning, middle and end of the Local News Accelerator, Illinois Answers Project newsroom leaders described research as their greatest area of growth at 30% from where they started.
- 2. Product development** helped them think through how to measure impact and create an impact tracker that allowed them to track and report more easily to funders and the public. It also helped to shape their journalism at the earliest stages. While developing stories, reporters and editors asked each other how an idea could lead to an impact. More to come on the impact tracker.

**How did Illinois Answers Project frame its project? (This is the three-part challenge statement)**

Illinois Answers Project joined the Medill Local News Accelerator, part of Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. As part of the program, the news organization’s leadership team clarified its goal to go from producing weekly stories to creating sharp, focused, deep solutions and investigative journalism that holds the powerful to account

**Medill Enterprise Sustainability Assessment (MESA): Illinois Answers Project’s growth in five pillars of the Accelerator**

<b>RESEARCH &amp; INSIGHTS</b>	<b>+30%</b>
<b>CONTENT STRATEGY</b>	<b>+29%</b>
<b>BUSINESS STRATEGY</b>	<b>+25%</b>
<b>PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>+10%</b>
<b>LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>+27%</b>

The Accelerator measures its partners’ mastery of these five competencies through a partner self-assessment fielded at the beginning, middle and end of the program.

and changes lives and laws. They framed it as a three-part challenge statement.

**Part 1:** The vision, an aspirational statement of what they want to achieve.

**Part 2:** Concrete measurements, both quantitative and qualitative, that describe success.

**Part 3:** Strategies and tactics. These are major themes and specific actions that will ensure the newsroom realizes the vision.

Here's an example of one of the strategies, a few of the tactics that support that strategy and concrete measurements that describe success.

### Strategies & tactics (aka how we'll do it + how we'll know it worked)

**Strategy 1:**

Build tracking system that allows us to measure qualitative and quantitative impacts of our work.



- Determine definitions of different types of impact by mid-August.
- Change impact tracking system to make it easier to use; track and report successes by mid-September.
- Include partner metrics and impact in tracking system by mid-September.

Rachel Aretakis, one of the team leaders and state and solutions editor for Illinois Answers Project, said the Accelerator helped the organization find the words to articulate its journalistic strategy. “Changing lives and laws by investigating responses to systemic problems and holding the powerful to account across Chicago and Illinois was not language we had before,” Aretakis said.



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Rachel Aretakis

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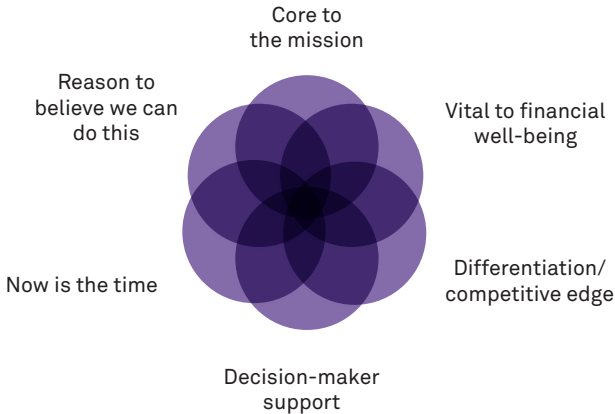
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### How did Illinois Answers Project go about solving their problem?

Leaders described the process as trying something, striking out, stepping back and finding more foundational problems to solve. Specifically, they used SMART goals. SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Aspirational Yet Achievable, Relevant and Timebound. Here's how it worked:

- **Specific:** The Illinois Answers project would go from producing weekly stories to creating sharp, focused, deep solutions and investigative journalism that holds the powerful to account and changes lives and laws.
- **Measurable:** They would go from not having clearly defined and measurable impact to defining and measuring impact based on industry best practices.
- **Achievable:** Yes. Early in the program they researched best practices from Gannett/the Detroit Free Press, then they built a tracker in an existing program.
- **Relevant:** The ability to measure and track with an easy-to-use form on the front end and a friendly view on the back end would give them the ability to report to their funders and the public about their work.
- **Timebound:** September 2023.

They used a feasibility filter to test their vision. The news organization knew the vision was central to their mission, it was achievable and it was specific. They were ready to go, and the scope was big enough to make a difference.



One of the keys to the work for Illinois Answers Project was to get reporters and editors to buy into the changes around elevating journalism. As part of the process later in the five-month program, they gathered staff for a sticky-note exercise where they brainstormed coverage areas, focusing on journalism with impact and solutions journalism.



### OLD IMPACT TRACKER

Entered By	Date	Story	Staff Member	Type of Impact	Narrative
418 Dan Hinkel	11/4/2022	Top Lightfoot Aide Who Led Heavily Promoted Anti-Violence Effort	Dan Hinkel	Personal Action: Individual takes action	Maiah either quit or got fired after we published. It's unclear which
419 Jared	11/8/2022	New Illinois Law Gives Cops Choice Not To Jail People for Smu	Jared Ruteck	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Jared and Casey's story was featured in the Illinois Justice Project
420 Jared	11/10/2022	New Illinois Law Gives Cops Choice Not To Jail People for Smu	Jared Ruteck	Media: Editorial/Opinion piece	The story was supported by a Sun-Times editorial.
421 Jared	11/10/2022	You Can Take It With You: Some Chicago Police Collected Masses	Jared Ruteck	Media: Editorial/Opinion piece	The story was featured in a news roundup by Wirepoints.
422 Dan Hinkel	11/18/2022	With end of Roe, can abortion opponents in other states sue or	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	The story was posted on Capitol Fax
423 Dan Hinkel	11/17/2022	With end of Roe, can abortion opponents in other states sue or	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Crain's republished
424 Jared	11/21/2022	Illinois Public Salaries Database	Jared Ruteck	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	The newsletter by City Cast Chicago linked to the database and
425 Casey	12/6/2022	Life and Death in Chicago's Most Dangerous Bike Lane	Casey Toner	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Chicago City Coast spotlighted our story in a podcast
426 Casey	12/6/2022	The costly toll of dead-end drug arrests	Casey Toner	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Mentioned in a policy paper by the ACLU, the Appesseed Fund, &
427 Dan Hinkel	2/17/2023	Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence pr	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Crain's republished
428 Rachel	2/16/2023	Aid. Rod Sawyer did legal work for firm that bought Beverly hor	Rachel Hinto	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	BCC republished
429 Rachel	1/19/2023	State Officials Sued for Allowing Foster Children to Languish in	Rachel Hinto	Public Action: Lawsuit filed	
430 Dan Hinkel	2/17/2023	Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence pr	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Capitol Fax blogged about it
431 Dan Hinkel	2/18/2023	Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence pr	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Appeared on ABC7
432 Dan Hinkel	2/20/2023	Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence pr	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	BCC republished
433 Rachel	1/19/2023	Insurance Giant Failed Foster Kids with Inadequate Care	Rachel Hinto	Government Action: Investigation	
434 Dan Hinkel	2/21/2023	Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence pr	Dan Hinkel	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Politico included it in playbook
435 Alex	3/11/2023	Fires Continue to Kill People in Unsafe Buildings as Chicago Ig	Alex	Media: Interview with press	Appeared on ABC7
436 Alex	3/13/2023	Fires Continue to Kill People in Unsafe Buildings as Chicago Ig	Alex	Media: Interview with press	Appeared on WBZ5 Reset
437 Alex	3/17/2023	Fires Continue to Kill People in Unsafe Buildings as Chicago Ig	Alex	Media: Interview with press	Appeared on CityCast Chicago
438 Casey	6/2/2023	Big Spending and a Springfield Joyride for South Suburban Pe	Casey Toner	Media: Editorial/Opinion piece	Ted Slowik wrote a column about it. Pat Quinn waded in
439 Casey	6/2/2023	Big Spending and a Springfield Joyride for South Suburban Pe	Casey Toner	Media: Editorial/Opinion piece	Capitol Fax weighed in
440 Casey	6/2/2023	Big Spending and a Springfield Joyride for South Suburban Pe	Casey Toner	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Politico included it in playbook
441 Casey	6/2/2023	CPS Faces Dwindling Enrollment, Empty Buildings, Soaring De	Casey Toner	Media: Cited by other non-opinion press	Capitol Fax linked in
442 Casey	6/2/2023	CPS Faces Dwindling Enrollment, Empty Buildings, Soaring De	Casey Toner	Media: Social Media	Featured on Reddit's Chicago subreddit
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### NEW IMPACT TRACKER

**BGA** | Better Government Association  
Investigations. Solutions. Policy. Impact.

## IMPACT TRACKER

Use this form to record the real-world change that happens as a result of our work — the new law, the investigation, the company admitting its mistakes, and so on. [Click here](#) to learn more about the different types of impact.

Note: The same story/analysis may have additional impact in the future. If you do, return here and fill out this form again.

**What department is this impact from?**

Illinois Answers Project

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**What type of impact is this? \***

- Advocacy impact
- Benefit to source/subject
- Change in conversation or understanding
- Community activated
- Government investigation

**One-sentence description of impact, written as a headline. \***

Example: "Board reverses substance diversion, superior judge" or "Five school police bring \$6.6 million to New York."

**Summary of impact, written as a paragraph in complete sentences using "we" instead of "I". Describe what changed and how it is come to our journalism/policy work/civic engagement. \***

Example: "The legislature approved a bill that would use the state-run phone-based phone of text messaging encryption apps that can be used to make for Freedom of Information Act. The bill's sponsor, Rep. John Rios, led a broad coalition of lawmakers to the bill's passage."

**Date of impact \***

**Link to story/analysis/event most closely associated with this impact. \***

## How our impact tracker has changed

FROM	TO
Several types of impact with no definitions	Narrowed list of impact types with clear definitions based on industry standards
Busy excel document that is hard to read and fill out	Easy-to-use form via formstack that has clear instructions
Excel document	Ability to send regular reports and organize data efficiently via formstack

## What were the most important findings Illinois Answers Project came to through Medill-sponsored research?

The Illinois Answers Project research was complicated when Medill researchers discovered an influx of bots had muddied the data. A post on X, formerly Twitter, from the Illinois Answers account included the survey link along with an invitation to fill it out for the opportunity to win a cash prize. That language attracted thousands of bot responses that Medill researchers accounted for with two separate data sets: One with a larger number of respondents (but perhaps still containing some bot responses) and one with a smaller number of respondents coming only from Illinois Answers Project's own email list, which was bot-free. In addition to the audience insights gained, this sequence of events allowed Illinois Answers to build process wins in safeguarding audience research.

Here are takeaways:

- Respondents were young, highly engaged news consumers, providing Illinois Answers Project with an excellent foundation for growth.
- This group is willing to pay for news, which is fodder for a conversation about a campaign targeting individual donors.
- Readers' coverage priorities offer a chance to compare their own priorities and decide how coverage can stand out in a crowded news landscape.
- Respondents were highly engaged with competitors, but this list may spark ideas for future partnerships.

As Kathryn Dugal, who at the time was audience development manager at Illinois Answers Project, said: "There is a group of highly engaged younger people, who are subscribers (to our newsletter) and who are willing to fill out a survey. It's really promising. It's a small group we can leverage. That was really new to us."



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Kathryn Dugal

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### What worked?

The Illinois Answers Project team leaders for the project agreed that the best part of the program was the opportunity to take time away from the newsroom to evaluate top priorities. In the day-to-day workings of the newsroom, editors are constantly putting out fires. The leaders found that the dedicated time at Northwestern once a month gave them an opportunity to break through the noise of the newsroom, break down problems and find solutions in their own newsroom.

Here are three specific successes:

- 1. Impact:** Defining types of impact, creating the impact tracker, having conversations with reporters to help them focus on potential impact early in the process and doing training around journalism with impact and the impact tracker helped to elevate the journalism.
- 2. Cohort:** La Raza supported an Illinois Answers Project outreach by circulating info about the event in Humboldt Park, where La Raza circulates, on their social media accounts and a note in print, too. Illinois Answers Project also met with Crain's Chicago Business to explore opportunities to partner on projects.
- 3. Solutions:** Using tools and techniques from the Local News Accelerator, the newsroom has specific plans to continue the work it began in the Accelerator to focus on solutions journalism in 2024. This has included a restructuring of the newsroom to hire journalists who will focus on solutions journalism.

## Challenge for 2024

Illinois Answers Project will sharpen its focus on solutions reporting to better serve marginalized communities and elevate public discourse to spark meaningful change and combat news fatigue.

## What didn't work?

Illinois Answers Project faced serious challenges throughout the program, from experienced staff turnover to the top editor resigning. But, as Kathryn said, they rolled with the punches and persevered. Here are a few of the rough patches:

- 1. Research:** Unfortunately, bots contaminated the initial research, and troubleshooting the problems delayed getting the research until late in the five-month program. While the experts scrubbed the data, Illinois Answers was not confident in the results except for the small number of people who had subscribed to their email.
- 2. Original focus:** Their application for the program focused on sustainability and a member program. With the newness of the brand, it was hard to know without research at the outset how to best approach membership models.

## What did Illinois Answers Project learn about their audience as part of this project?

They have a highly engaged young audience, which was a surprise to the team. The research also showed the audience was overwhelmingly white, which will provide the leaders with a roadmap for making diversity a priority. This knowledge will move them more quickly from an attitude of “we should make a change” to one in which diversity in staffing and content is more urgent.

## This work as part of a five-month program focusing on identifying a crucial challenge to the organization's future. How did having a limited amount of time encourage Illinois Answers Project to try new things?

The limited time helped the team focus. They agreed it's good to have a deadline. It creates urgency.



State and Solutions Editor Rachel Aretakis presents at the Local News Accelerator Graduation.

### What would Illinois Answers do differently now?

The team said knowing what they know now, the other editor should have been involved from the start. Key leader involvement would have been helpful to move things along more quickly with staff. The key editor did participate in the last month of the program, and he was on board and picked it up quickly.

While Illinois Answers Project did take advantage of the other newsrooms in the cohort, they would like to have taken more of an opportunity to have frank conversations. During lunch, perhaps they could have networked more.

### **What advice would they give to others who join future cohorts?**

- Take full advantage of networking.
- Go in with an open mind.
- It might be hard to fully disengage from the newsroom if you're at a daily paper but designate someone to be in charge when you're gone.
- Involve the whole newsroom: Ensure everyone is bought into it. Leadership and staff. everyone! You can make decisions from the top down all you want, but it will not be successful if people aren't into it. Choose good representatives from among the staff as part of the team. Communicate with the staff.

### **What shared resources would most greatly benefit Illinois Answers Project if they had access to them?**

Research about the news landscape. Getting research done right at the beginning.