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FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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*Affiliations appear only for purposes of identification.*

By email

December 19, 2025

The Honorable Cristina Castro  
Illinois Senate Executive Committee  
121 C Capitol Building  
Springfield, IL 62706

The Honorable Bill Cunningham  
Illinois Senate Executive Committee  
309 J Capitol Building  
Springfield, IL 62706

The Honorable Jennifer Gong-Gershowitz  
Illinois House Judiciary Committee  
271-S Stratton Office Building  
Springfield, IL 62706

The Honorable Mary Beth Canty  
Illinois House Judiciary Committee  
280-S Stratton Office Building  
Springfield, IL 62706

Re: Support for Protections for Non-Student Public Media

Dear Chair Castro, Vice-Chair Cunningham, Chairperson Gong-Gershowitz,  
and Vice-Chairperson Canty:

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press writes in strong support of a proposed amendment to the College Campus Press Act, 110 ILCS 13/1 et seq., that would afford robust editorial protections for non-student public media affiliated with public institutions of higher learning. Were the amendment to pass, it would be the first law of its kind in the nation and would establish Illinois as a leader in insulating public media from undue political influence or pressure.

The Reporters Committee is the nation's largest non-profit providing free legal services for journalists and news organizations across the country. It was founded by leading journalists and media lawyers in 1970 when the nation's news media faced an unprecedented wave of government subpoenas forcing reporters to name confidential sources. Today, its attorneys provide pro bono legal representation, amicus curiae support, and other legal resources to protect First Amendment freedoms and the newsgathering rights of journalists. The Reporters Committee is also a leader in advocating for robust protects for the editorial autonomy of public media. *See, e.g.,* Amicus Curiae Brief of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and Independent NPR Member Stations in Support of Plaintiffs' Motion for

Summary Judgment, *NPR et al. v. Trump et al.*, No. 25-CV-01674 (D.D.C. filed June 20, 2025), <https://perma.cc/XPU7-M3H3>.

Current Illinois law supports post-secondary student journalists and their advisors at public universities by prohibiting infringement upon their work except in circumstances where the material is harassing, threatening, intimidating, obscene, or amounts to incitement. 110 ILCS 13/30. The proposed amendment would bolster free press protections for non-student media by extending the Illinois College Campus Press Act to all public media affiliated with a public post-secondary institution.

The reliance of public media on public funds makes it especially susceptible to interference by political actors. Perhaps the most prominent recent example is President Donald Trump’s explicit reference to perceived media “bias” in the administration’s efforts to defund national public media. *The NPR, PBS Grift Has Ripped Us Off for Too Long*, The White House (April 14, 2025), <https://perma.cc/XAD5-RNQA>; David Folkenflik, *NPR and Colorado Public Radio Stations Sue Trump White House*, NPR (May 27, 2025), <https://perma.cc/B3DV-ECL5>.

And there are instances of public universities seeking to improperly impinge on non-student media outlets’ editorial independence. In 2019, for example, the University of Illinois sought to compel reporters for WUIS, an NPR station affiliated with the Springfield campus, to identify confidential sources, after the outlet ran a series of stories on professors accused of sexual misconduct. The station, ProPublica, other media stakeholders, and a coalition of students urged the university to change its Title IX reporting standards for journalists, arguing that requiring them to disclose the identity of victims of sexual misconduct who agree to speak with news outlets on the basis that their identities will be protected chills public interest reporting. Elizabeth Donald, *NPR Illinois Clashes with University Licensee Over Coverage of Harassment on Campus*, Current (Oct. 31, 2019), <https://perma.cc/2ESX-DEFB>; Letter from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press to the Illinois Board of Trustees (Nov. 6, 2019), <https://perma.cc/2CJ2-UMP7>.

Other non-student NPR outlets, like WOSU licensed through Ohio State University, and WAMU, licensed through American University, have developed operational standards to prevent similar attempts to interfere in their editorial autonomy. Marcia Apperson, *Stations Licensed to Universities Should Insist on Editorial Freedom*, PBS (Nov. 25, 2019), <https://perma.cc/VCU4-U9BK>.

As noted, were this measure to pass, Illinois would lead the nation in ensuring, through statute, that public media outlets run by public universities can operate with full editorial autonomy. Further, while editorial interference like that described above is rare, ongoing efforts at the federal level to cure perceived “bias” in public media highlight the vulnerability of these outlets to undue political pressure. *See generally* Amicus Curiae Brief of Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press et al., *supra*.

Moreover, these protections are particularly necessary given the critical role public media licensed to universities plays in the dissemination of news and other information beyond college campuses. Among NPR members, for instance, more than half of their licenses are owned by universities. Most of these schools are public and serve communities as large as New York City and as small as Maryville, Missouri. *NPR Stations and Public Media*, NPR (last visited Dec. 14, 2025), <https://perma.cc/4LEW-DLQ4>. Nine colleges and universities in Illinois operate radio and television stations that would be protected under this proposed change. *Statewide*, NPR Illinois (last visited Dec. 15, 2025), <https://perma.cc/QBC9-Z2PL>.

Given the importance of public media, particularly at the local level, legal guardrails are necessary. This is doubly true as public colleges and universities can themselves face political pressure and threats to their academic freedom. Amending Illinois law will establish a necessary and robust “firewall” between public universities and their affiliated or licensed newsrooms, which will help protect the free flow of information generally and the freedom of public media specifically. Firewalls like the one under consideration are necessary to ensure the actual and perceived independence of news outlets receiving public funding. *Cf.* Letter from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee (April 28, 2020), <https://perma.cc/5ZR5-2826> (describing the importance of a legally enforceable firewall for the editorial independence of public international broadcasters).

Finally, state governments have the constitutional authority to create such firewalls. *Cf. F.C.C. v. League of Women Voters of California*, 468 U.S. 364, 369 (1984) (noting that when Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting under 47 U.S.C. § 396 it intentionally implemented measures to “protect [] local stations from governmental interference and control”); *Arkansas Educ. Television Comm’n v. Forbes*, 523 U.S. 666, 674–75 (1998) (holding that when a public broadcaster exercises editorial discretion in programming selection, it engages in speech activity). Just as a state can establish student media outlets as “traditional public fora,” where any content-based restriction on speech must meet a high bar to pass constitutional muster, it can do so for non-student public media. *Cf. Moore v. Watson*, 738 F. Supp. 2d 817, 831 (N.D. Ill. 2010) (discussing how the College Campus Press Act extends First Amendment protections to students from adverse actions based on the content of their publication). The Reporters Committee fully supports the proposed changes to Illinois’s College Campus Press Act and urges the legislature to act quickly in enacting them into law.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Reporters Committee’s Vice President of Policy Gabe Rottman ([grottman@rcfp.org](mailto:grottman@rcfp.org)) or Fellow Kennedy Woodard ([kwoodard@rcfp.org](mailto:kwoodard@rcfp.org)) with any questions.

Sincerely,

Reporters Committee  
for Freedom of the Press