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Responsive Support: Evaluation of the 2025 Spark & Immediate Needs Funds

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Executive Summary

In 2025, the Tiny News Collective (TNC) administered two regranting programs designed to provide high-impact, low-barrier financial support to local news entrepreneurs: the Spark Fund (grants up to \$1,000 for professional development) and the Immediate Needs Fund (grants up to \$5,000 for rapid-response organizational stabilization). This evaluation assessed operational effectiveness, grantee outcomes and reviewer reliability across both funds.

Key Performance Highlights

Spark Fund	Immediate Needs Fund
80% gained a new skill or knowledge	78% avoided negative outcome or crisis
57% said new skills significantly advanced sustainability/growth goals	88% confirmed the fund resolved their immediate need/stabilized situation
86% strongly agreed the application process was appropriate	78% strongly agreed disbursement timing matched the urgency of their need
40%	Improvement in reviewer scoring consistency between Immediate Needs Fund Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, driven by high reviewer retention and applicant coaching.

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Key Findings

Spark Fund: Catalyzing Professional Growth

The Spark Fund demonstrated strong impact as a tool for individual and organizational development:

- Nearly 80% of recipients reported gaining a new skill or knowledge area, and 57% said this significantly advanced their sustainability or growth goals.
- The fund supported a broad range of activities: conferences (50%), educational materials, coaching, certifications and non-traditional professional development such as Chamber of Commerce memberships and HR infrastructure development.
- Knowledge transfer among recipients remains a gap: 50% of recipients had not shared learnings with peers, citing time constraints. However, the other half actively shared through formal TNC channels and informal peer conversations.
- Application satisfaction was high: 86% of Spark Fund recipients strongly agreed that the process was appropriate for a small, non-competitive grant.

Immediate Needs Fund: Crisis Mitigation and Bridge Financing

The Immediate Needs Fund proved to be essential risk capital for newsrooms navigating volatility:

- Nearly 80% of recipients reported that a negative organizational or community outcome would have occurred without this funding, and 88% confirmed the fund resolved the immediate need or stabilized the situation.
- The fund successfully bridged temporary funding gaps, stabilized freelance payroll, prevented founder debt and provided breathing room during subscriber loss caused by external economic shocks.
- 78% of recipients strongly agreed the timeline between approval and disbursement was appropriate to the urgency of their need, and application time for most recipients was kept to under an hour.

Reviewer Reliability and Process Quality

The external review process showed meaningful improvement over the program year:

- Scoring consistency improved by 40% from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2, largely due to high reviewer retention (4 of 6 returned) and the development of shared rubric understanding.
- TNC provided application coaching for prospective grantees, which may have reduced variability and improved the overall clarity and quality of submissions.

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Conclusion

Both the Spark Fund and Immediate Needs Fund are operating effectively and delivering meaningful value to TNC members. The funds maintain a low administrative burden while generating outsized impact: catalyzing professional growth, averting organizational crises, and—in several cases—unlocking major external funding. The operational improvements made between cycles, particularly in reviewer reliability, reflect a maturing program infrastructure.

Strategic investments in knowledge management, data standardization and coaching infrastructure will strengthen both programs for 2026 and beyond, deepening the TNC's role as a trusted partner in the sustainability of local news.

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The Tiny News Collective (TNC) serves as a critical incubator for a new generation of local news entrepreneurs. In 2025, TNC expanded its support model by launching two of four regranting initiatives: the Spark Fund to support professional development and the Immediate Needs Fund for urgent organizational needs and emergent community information needs.

This evaluation assesses the operational effectiveness of these funds to offer evidence-based refinements for future iterations, including the upcoming capacity building and collaborative innovation tracks.

- **Spark Fund:** This initiative provides grants of up to \$1,000 with the explicit intent of facilitating professional growth. By funding professional development, executive coaching and technical training, the Spark Fund aims to catalyze individual leadership maturity and organizational sustainability.
- **Immediate Needs Fund:** This fund provides grants of up to \$5,000 to provide rapid-response funding for organizational stabilization during revenue shocks or to address emergent community information needs.

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Evaluation Questions

Program	Primary Evaluation Focus
Spark Fund	Effectiveness of skill transfer and network multiplier: Did the professional development investment lead to the implementation of new skills and processes? Was the knowledge successfully shared across the collective?
Immediate Needs Fund	Operational efficiency and stabilization impact: Is the fund delivering support with sufficient speed to address immediate needs? Did the grant successfully prevent an averted crisis and contribute to organizational stabilization?
Cross-Cutting	Data readiness and program improvement: What baseline data exists, and what new metrics are required to link funding to long-term impact? What parts of the process are working well vs. need changing?

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Evaluation Methods

This evaluation used a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to assess the operational efficacy and strategic impact of the funds. The methodology included:

- **Data Review:** Rigorous analysis of application submissions, award records and final reports to identify quantitative trends.
- **Reliability Analysis:** An analysis of external reviewer data to evaluate scoring consistency of the Immediate Needs Fund.
- **Qualitative Case Studies:** Seven in-depth interviews (three Spark Fund and four Immediate Needs Fund recipients) to document lived experiences and long-term outcomes.
- **Structured Surveying:** Analysis of grantee feedback regarding the application process and fund impact.
- **Reviewer Consultations:** Direct outreach to external reviewers to triangulate qualitative scoring experiences with quantitative data.

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Operational Effectiveness and Efficiency

Application Accessibility

A primary objective of TNC is to minimize the time and labor required for members to access capital. Data indicates that both funds successfully maintained a low-barrier entry point.

More than half of Spark Fund and Immediate Needs Fund recipients said they spent less than an hour on the application

Percent of ___ recipients who spent less than 1 hour completing application



Sources: Survey of Spark Fund recipients (n = 14); Survey of Immediate Needs Fund recipients (n = 18)

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Application Process Satisfaction

Recipients of both the Spark Fund and Immediate Needs Fund felt the application process was appropriate to the fund's goals: 86% of Spark Fund recipients strongly agreed that the process was appropriate for a small, non-competitive grant, and 78% of Immediate Needs recipients strongly agreed that the process was appropriate for time-sensitive and urgent needs. Seventy-two percent (72%) of Immediate Needs Fund recipients also strongly agreed that the timeline between the application approval and funds disbursement was appropriate to the urgency of the need. By keeping application times between one and two hours, TNC ensures that newsrooms can navigate crises and growth without the administrative burden common in traditional philanthropy.

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Most Spark Fund and Immediate Needs Fund recipients think the application process is appropriate to need

Percent of ____ recipients who strongly agreed process was appropriate



Source: Survey of Spark Fund recipients (n = 14); Survey of Immediate Needs Fund recipients (n = 18)

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Fund Performance Analysis: Spark Fund

Facilitating Professional Growth

The Spark Fund served as a critical engine for facilitating the professional growth of founders and their newsrooms. Nearly 80% of recipients said the fund introduced a new skill or knowledge to their newsroom, and 57% said this new skill or knowledge had very significantly contributed to their sustainability or growth goals. Beyond mindset shifts from survivalist to strategic, the fund removed psychological and financial barriers to growth. That included helping newsrooms achieve legal and tax compliance and build necessary HR scaffolding, tangible, high-impact outcomes that reduced long-term organizational risk.

Most Spark Fund recipients say fund introduced new and impactful skills/knowledge to their newsrooms

Percent who strongly agreed _____



Source: Survey of Spark Fund recipients (n = 14)

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Spark Fund Activities

Half of Spark Fund recipients used their professional development grant to attend a conference. Others used the fund to buy educational materials, join an organization, take

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a class or certification and work with an executive coach. About 20% of recipients used their grant for activities not specifically described by the survey or that might not be considered professional development at first glance, such as attending a book fair for promotional purposes, hiring an HR professional to help create a manual for the newsroom, and traveling to learn about a topic from professionals in another field.

Half of Spark Fund recipients used professional development funds to attend a conference

Activity	Percent
Attend a conference	50%
Buy educational materials	7%
Take a class/certification	7%
Join an organization	7%
Work with a coach	7%
Other	21%

Source: Survey of Spark Fund recipients (n = 14); Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.
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Knowledge Transfer

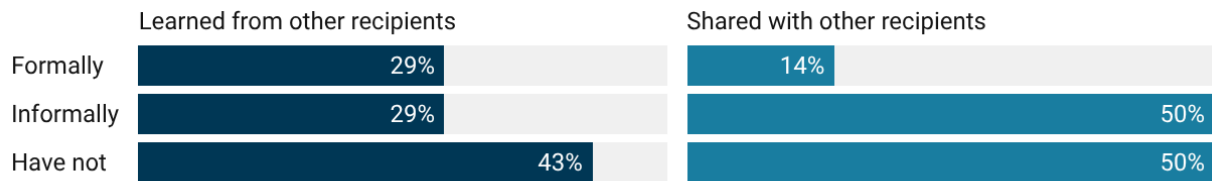
Individual leadership growth was significant, but the desired multiplier effect among recipients remains a challenge. Fifty percent of Spark Fund recipients said they had not shared new knowledge with other fund recipients, and 43% said they had not learned about other recipients' experiences. Most cited a lack of time as the biggest barrier to sharing.

However, the other half is sharing information through both formal channels provided by TNC and informal channels such as one-on-one conversations.

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About half of Spark Fund recipients have learned from or shared new knowledge with other fund recipients

Percent of Spark Fund recipients who said they have learned/shared knowledge formally/informally/have not



Source: Survey of Spark Fund recipients (n = 14); Question format allowed those who indicated learning or sharing to select both forms of sharing if applicable, so % exceeds 100%.

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Fund Performance Analysis: Immediate Needs Fund

Crisis Mitigation and Stabilization

The Immediate Needs Fund acted as essential risk capital during periods of high volatility. Nearly 80% of recipients say a negative organizational or community outcome would have occurred without this funding, and 88% say the fund resolved the immediate need and stabilized the situation. The fund successfully averted crises by preventing personal debt for founders and stabilizing freelance payroll during temporary revenue shocks.

Most Immediate Needs Fund recipients say the fund helped avoid a crisis for their newsroom/community and stabilized the immediate situation

Percent of respondents who said the fund _____



Source: Survey of Immediate Needs Fund recipients (n = 18)

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Resolution Duration

The fund serves primarily as a bridge, providing temporary stabilization but not a permanent solution. But no recipients indicated the fund had not fully addressed the immediate challenge.

The Immediate Needs Fund temporarily stabilized emergent needs of most recipients

Percent of respondents who said _____ by Immediate Needs Fund



Source: Survey of Immediate Needs Fund recipients (n = 18)

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Proof of Performance

Small, timely investments provided the proof of concept required for institutional validation. For example, Austin Vida used a \$5,000 grant to stabilize a pilot event, which directly led to the acquisition of a \$100,000 external grant, a 20x return on the initial TNC investment. Another organization, Ethiopique, used the funds to produce voter guides that increased engagement 78%.

Conclusion

Both the Spark Fund and Immediate Needs Fund are operating effectively and delivering meaningful value to TNC members. The data documents a consistent pattern: founders are gaining skills, averting organizational crises, and in at least one case, leveraging small TNC investments to unlock major external funding. The funds maintain a low administrative burden while generating impact that extends well beyond the initial grant amount.

The operational improvements made between cycles, particularly in reviewer reliability, reflect a program infrastructure that is actively learning and maturing. High reviewer retention, applicant coaching, and the development of shared rubric understanding have already produced measurable gains in consistency—a trajectory that should continue as both funds scale.

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Strategic investments in knowledge management, data standardization and coaching infrastructure will strengthen both programs for 2026 and beyond—deepening TNC's role as a trusted partner in the sustainability of local news. As TNC prepares to launch the capacity building and collaborative innovation tracks, the Spark and Immediate Needs Funds offer a strong operational foundation and a clear model for what responsive, high-trust grantmaking can accomplish.

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Appendix A: Spark Fund Case Studies

Case Study: Mat-Su Sentinel

Context and Challenge

For the Mat-Su Sentinel, the primary challenge was a lack of alignment between the grant's spending window and the schedule of traditional journalism conferences. As a tiny newsroom, the founder noted that she often had to adopt a "survivalist" mindset, never passing up a chance for funding but struggling to fit her specific organizational needs into the box provided by standard professional development grants.

The Sentinel needed more than just skill-building; it needed local legitimacy. In a region where personal relationships drive sponsorships and sustainability, the newsroom lacked a formal physical presence or a seat at the table with local business stakeholders.

The Intervention

The Spark Fund was used creatively to cover memberships in several local Chambers of Commerce. Although not a traditional form of journalism training or coaching, this was a critical development move for a founder-led organization. It allowed the founder to bridge the gap between being a digital-only entity and becoming a recognized player in the local business ecosystem.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The impact was immediate. The Sentinel gained a seat at the table with local stakeholders, becoming a visible participant at community events. This social capital has paved the way for deeper local sponsorships.

The founder now pays forward this strategic pivot by conducting founder calls and lightning talks within the TNC community, helping other members understand how to leverage non-traditional professional development for long-term sustainability.

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Case Study: Ottawa News Network

Context and Challenge

In the lean budget of a tiny newsroom, industry conferences and professional memberships are often the first items to be cut. The Ottawa News Network faced the risk of becoming disconnected from broader industry trends, professional standards and the networking opportunities that keep small newsrooms competitive and inspired.

The Intervention

The Spark Fund acted as an opportunistic growth tool, providing the funds necessary for leadership to attend Press Association and Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) conferences. This intervention allowed the organization to maintain high professional standards and stay integrated into the wider journalism community without straining their operational budget.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The knowledge gained at these conferences did not remain siloed within the leadership. Insights and professional standards were directly shared with university partners and student interns, effectively institutionalizing high-quality journalism practices within their collaborative student newsroom.

Although the founder noted that the administrative reporting felt somewhat heavy for a small grant, the long-term benefit was clear: the newsroom preserved its professional credibility and strengthened the pipeline for the next generation of journalists in their community.

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Appendix B: Immediate Needs Fund Case Studies

Case Study: Ethiopique

Context and Challenge

Ethiopique, serving the Ethiopian diaspora in the Washington, D.C. area, found itself in a precarious gap between funding tranches. Although the newsroom had successfully secured larger grants, a three-month delay in disbursement threatened to halt operations just as a critical election season was beginning.

The organization faced a choice: pause reporting during a peak period of audience need or find a way to sustain its freelance staff through the lull.

The Intervention

The Immediate Needs Fund provided \$5,000, which acted as in-between cash to bridge the funding gap. These funds were used specifically to retain the newsroom's freelance reporters, ensuring that vital election coverage and localized voter guides could continue in the community's primary language.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The continuity of coverage led to a 78% spike in audience engagement during the election cycle. By keeping its freelance staff active, Ethiopique was able to conduct community surveys that now inform their future editorial and revenue strategies.

The grant acted as a successful bridge, allowing the newsroom to reach its next major funding tranche without losing staff or momentum. The founder described the fund as a lifesaver that prevents predictable funding lulls from becoming permanent operational failures.

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Case Study: The 51st

Context and Challenge

As a worker-led cooperative newsroom, The 51st experienced a sudden and significant external economic shock shortly after launch. Federal budget cuts directly impacted the financial security of their local audience, leading to an immediate 10% drop in their monthly subscriber base.

As a startup, the newsroom was still in its runway phase, and this unexpected revenue hemorrhaging threatened to derail their post-launch transition period and potentially force staff cuts.

The Intervention

The Immediate Needs Fund provided \$5,000 to stabilize operations. Rather than cutting staff or output, the newsroom used the buffer to offer free memberships to community members impacted by the federal cuts, maintaining their community connection during a time of crisis.

The grant was awarded based on a 1-2 hour application process, which was crucial for a small team that lacked the administrative capacity for a high-hurdle grant application during a period of distress.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The grant provided the breathing room needed to avoid panic-driven cuts. It allowed the team to stay focused on long-term diversification, such as local business sponsorships, rather than reacting to a temporary revenue dip with permanent staff reductions.

The 51st remains operational and is continuing its pivot toward self-sustainability, using the stability provided by the Immediate Needs Fund to maintain its momentum during a critical transition.

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Case Study: Austin Vida

Context and Challenge

Austin Vida serves the Latinx community in their city through cultural reporting and storytelling. The newsroom had planned a pilot program—a personal essay series culminating in a live community reading event—to test whether live events could serve as a sustainable pillar for both revenue and community engagement.

When anticipated funding for the event fell through at the last minute, the project was at risk of cancellation. With community expectations already high and production deadlines looming, the organization lacked the immediate liquidity to move forward.

The Intervention

The Immediate Needs Fund provided a \$5,000 grant to save the pilot. The timing was critical; the grant was officially approved on the very morning the event was scheduled to take place.

Notably, this was an upfront disbursement. Because the newsroom had already committed to the expenses to keep the project on track, the arrival of funds allowed the organization to reimburse itself and maintain vital liquidity. That enabled the team to cover production costs, venue fees and storyteller stipends without long-term financial strain.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The results were transformative. An attendee from a local foundation was so impressed by the community engagement at the event that they invited a proposal for further support, ultimately resulting in a \$100,000 grant—a 20x return on the initial TNC investment.

The pilot proved the demand for safe spaces for community writing, and Austin Vida is now developing a series of writing workshops to create a self-sustaining cycle of content. This case demonstrates how a small, timely intervention can provide the proof of performance required to attract major philanthropic investment.

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Case Study: Black Belt News Network

Context and Challenge

In mid-2025, Black Belt News Network reached a critical crossroads. The organization was struggling with the financial burden of a legacy print model in a region where legal notice revenue was declining and operational costs were rising. Cindy Fisher, the founder and sole leader, realized the model was no longer sustainable and faced the daunting task of shuttering the print edition to pivot toward a regional digital model focused on reader revenue and donations.

This transition created immense psychological and operational pressure. Fisher had engaged an executive coach to navigate this high-stakes pivot, but as funds dwindled, the ability to pay for this specialized guidance was threatened, leaving the leader without a vital sounding board or board of directors to weigh the risks of the transition.

The Intervention

The Immediate Needs Fund provided a targeted investment specifically to cover the costs of executive coaching, a strategic intervention in leadership stability. By funding the coach, the Immediate Needs Fund ensured Fisher had the professional support necessary to manage the organizational disarray and psychological toll of a major structural shift.

Outcomes and Sustainability

The grant was a temporary fix in the context of the newsroom's total debt, but its impact on leadership morale and strategic clarity was significant. The coaching provided the stability needed to navigate successfully the potential merger of her operations into a larger regional nonprofit structure.

Fisher noted that the "hive mind" of the TNC network, including peer advice on bookkeepers and admin support, was as valuable as the cash. This grant effectively bridged the newsroom from the brink of closure to a potential new, more sustainable operational home.