

What the Loss of Federal Funding Really Means for Kalamazoo's Public Radio

Most people in Kalamazoo tune into WMUK 102.1 FM without thinking much about what keeps a public radio station on the air. The familiar mix of NPR shows, local reporting, classical music and community conversations feels steady – almost like background infrastructure we assume will always be there.

But behind those steady voices and playlists, the ground has shifted. This year's removal of federal support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) left hundreds of public stations nationwide scrambling, including WMUK, the NPR affiliate housed inside Western Michigan University.



For many listeners, the loss of CPB funding didn't mean much at first – mostly because people didn't know CPB funded stations like WMUK at all. Stephen Williams, WMUK's general manager, says that confusion is more common than people realize.

“The biggest misconception is that people think we are NPR,” Williams said. “If congress wanted to punish NPR, this was the strangest way to do it. NPR will be fine. It's the stations – especially medium and small ones like ours – that are hurting.”

Williams says CPB historically made up 7% to 10% of WMUK's operating budget. That may not sound like much, but the station depends on that money to cover some of its largest behind-the-scenes costs.

“A lot of what CPB did was invisible,” he said. “Programming, music royalties, distribution networks – the big stuff. The things that keep public radio actually running.”

That includes: NPR, BBC and other program fees – about \$250,000 a year, music royalties for every piece of classical or contemporary music played on-air, access to satellite distribution systems that deliver programming reliably, and infrastructure that allows WMUK's automation systems to schedule and receive shows every day.

Many of these services were negotiated or managed by CPB, meaning WMUK didn't just lose money – they inherited new responsibilities.

“Now that the funding is gone, it's not like I have 10% of my budget lying around,” Williams said. “We have to either raise more money or cut something else. And we can't just cut programming. If we cut programming, we lose the audience. And if we lose an audience, we lose more money. It's a cycle.”

The cuts ripple directly into local journalism – the work WMUK believes is their core mission.

“Gathering news is the most important thing we do locally,” Williams said. “It’s the one thing we can do better than anyone else.”

WMUK covers a wide stretch of Southwest Michigan, from Grand Rapids to Elkhart and from South Haven almost to Lansing. But with federal support gone, the station has already paused hiring and left at least one newsroom position unfilled.

“It affects morale,” Williams said. “When you’re doing this work because you believe in the mission – and then you’re defunded – it feels personal. You wonder what you did wrong. And the answer is nothing.”



Williams said it was especially difficult lobbying lawmakers in Washington, including WMU’s own member of congress, who voted for the cuts.

“There’s this idea floating around that public broadcasters are left-leaning or not impartial,”

Williams said. “But that’s not true. NPR has a public editor, we review complaints, we issue corrections. We work very hard to be fair.”

If there’s a bright spot in the story, it’s Kalamazoo itself.

“The support from the community has been incredible,” Williams said. “We blew past our fundraising goals. We heard from people we had never heard from before.”

Many listeners who didn't know WMUK relied on federal funding stepped in with donations, sustaining memberships and even major gifts.

“What we really need now is stability,” he said. “Monthly sustaining members help us plan. Endowments help us protect newsroom jobs long-term. Those are going to be crucial.”

Williams said he still believes the loss of CPB funding could be reversed. “The winds can change,” he said. “What feels permanent now may not be permanent at all.”

For now, WMUK is adjusting, fundraising and trying to safeguard the local reporting it sees as essential to Southwest Michigan.

And for listeners, understanding what was lost – and why it matters – might be the first step in keeping public radio strong in Kalamazoo.

