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Public Narrative Threatens Local News Publisher

CHICAGO – March 18, 2024 – The *McKinley Park News*, an award-winning local news publication serving Chicago's McKinley Park neighborhood, has decried attacks on its publication and small business by Public Narrative, a non-profit advocacy marketing organization.

“Public Narrative has threatened to cut us off from local news funding – and accused our publication of racism – because we're asking questions and raising concerns about their unilateral takeover of CIMA [the Chicago Independent Media Alliance],” said *McKinley Park News Publisher* Justin Kerr.

The Chicago Independent Media Alliance (CIMA) was a collection of 64 Chicago-based news publishers and media organizations that came together during the COVID-19 pandemic to enable support for the local publishing industry. Both the *McKinley Park News* and Public Narrative were individual group members, along with dozens of local media outlets.

CIMA was abruptly shut down in the summer of 2023, ending the fund-raisers, promotions, networking and other benefits it was delivering to members.

While shuttered, Public Narrative and The Reader Institute for Community Journalism, which inherited CIMA during the transition of *The Reader* newspaper to a non-profit model, were working to shuffle the ownership and control of CIMA to Public Narrative. This self-styled “acquisition” was conducted without transparency or disclosure, and no members of CIMA were told it was underway.

In an Internet video call on February 29, 2024, in which the audience was muted, Public Narrative's Jhmira Alexander announced the non-profit's takeover of CIMA. When members attempted to ask questions and raise issues, Alexander told those who did not like Public Narrative's control of CIMA to leave the organization.

Kerr and the *McKinley Park News* have joined other publisher members of CIMA to voice their concerns, including how membership is seemingly cut off from all decisions, information, leadership and governance of the organization.

“This is not what we were told CIMA would be,” Kerr said. “Independent’ is part of the group's name, and we should be governed by ourselves, not controlled by a non-news, marketing-focused non-profit that is laden with conflicts of interest.”

Kerr pointed to the investments he made in CIMA as a publisher and business owner, including heavily promoting the organization and encouraging donations to it, sharing his hard-won news brand credibility, and directly engaging in consulting work for CIMA websites.

“All of us worked so hard on CIMA,” Kerr said. “Public Narrative is stealing it away.”

Kerr also pointed to Public Narrative’s harmful role in dominating the market for Chicago journalism funding, which Public Narrative is positioned to do as one of the select few “fiduciary sponsors” of Press Forward Chicago and its \$10 million fund to support local journalism, a recent initiative of the half-billion dollar, nationwide Press Forward program.

“Threatening to kick the *McKinley Park News* out of CIMA is a threat to cut off our access to local journalism funding,” Kerr said.

“Local news publications like ours are supposed to benefit from this funding,” he said. “Non-profit advocacy marketers like Public Narrative will only help publications that are customers for their publicly stated, partisan agendas.”

Kerr also noted Public Narrative’s unfounded charges of racism against the *McKinley Park News* in an email sent in response to Kerr’s questions. “Malicious defamation in service to Public Narrative’s massive conflicts of interest merits no response,” he said.

“Rather than reply to our valid questions about their takeover of CIMA, Public Narrative sent only threats and intimidation,” Kerr said. “We were told to quit criticizing Public Narrative and their coup of CIMA, or we’d be kicked out.”

This threat to expel the *McKinley Park News* from CIMA is conducted without any process, oversight, governance or chance to appeal, Kerr said.

“Unfortunately, it looks like this is what the local publishing community can expect from Public Narrative: arbitrary and self-serving control over a supposedly independent alliance,” Kerr said.

Public Narrative’s dominance of local journalism funding is another conflict of interest and reason why the group should not unilaterally control CIMA, Kerr added.

“These groups are supposed to listen to and help the local news industry,” Kerr said. “Public Narrative’s takeover of CIMA is just the latest example of the ongoing exploitation of our industry by non-practitioners who have a mission to market agendas, not help local news publishers.”

In response to Public Narrative’s actions and to discuss a path forward, Kerr and other CIMA publisher members have set an independent meeting at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 19, 2024, at the Sky Ride Tap, 105 W. Van Buren St., Chicago. All who place a primacy on service to the interests of their audiences through publishing original local content are welcome to attend, Kerr said.

ABOUT THE MCKINLEY PARK NEWS

The *McKinley Park News* is an award-winning local news publication covering the McKinley Park neighborhood of Chicago from its website at <https://mckinleypark.news>. Its features include

original news reporting, a calendar of neighborhood events, interactive memberships and subscriptions, and sponsorships and advertising. Online as a neighborhood news source since 2016, the *McKinley Park News* launched its commercial operations in 2019 as a publication of Local News LLC. In 2024, the McKinley Park Civic Association lauded the *McKinley Park News* through the William H.G. Toms Community Service Award to Publisher Justin Kerr for the publication's local journalism. It is a member of LION Publishers and the McKinley Park Underage Drinking and Other Substances Abuse Coalition (McK-UDOS).

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