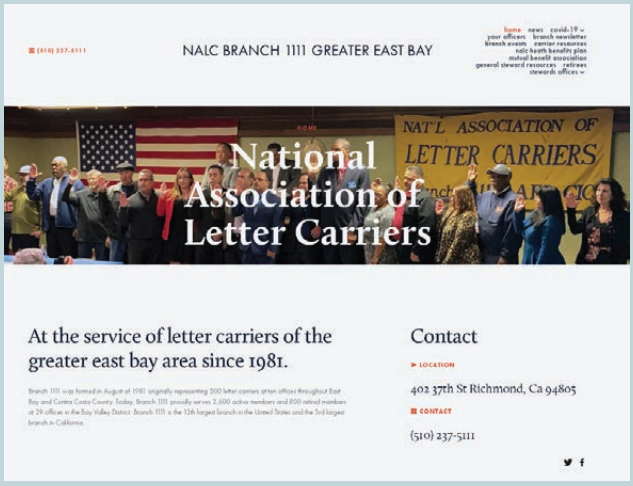
Locally sourced

Branch websites keep members informed and connected

In today's information climate, the news changes on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis. Given the chaotic period we are in, it can be difficult for NALC to convey all of the latest updates to members, particularly those changes that affect letter carriers on a local level.

Over the past several years, however, many branches have attempted to fill that role by creating their own online platforms to communicate with members. One way they do so is by setting up their own branch websites, which



members can visit for updated, locally specific information from their own officers and stewards.

One of these websites is branch1111.org, the local domain for Greater East Bay, CA Branch 1111. The website was created by Branch 1111 member **Julie McCormick**, who was inspired to create the website after attending a class about online outreach at the NALC Leadership Academy. She had no prior experience with website design, so she figured out the technological side on her own. "I just researched [how to create a website], and watched a bunch of video [tutorials]," she said.

McCormick said that when she was creating the website, "we already knew what we wanted on it." Since then, McCormick looks for local updates and news from NALC Headquarters to publish as updates. "Anything that is important gets run through right away," she explained.

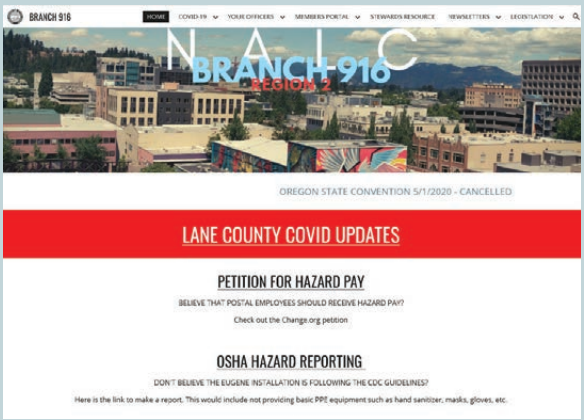
Everything that goes on the site is intended to further the branch's overall goal for the website. "We just wanted a space where stewards could go for information, a space that was easily accessible for members," McCormick said. "I wanted to push our branch into the 21st century, because everything is changing and evolving."

Overall, she says, the members seem to really like the site, particularly because it allows the branch to publish things it could not include in a regular print newsletter. "Our print newsletter is in black and white, but on our website, we can print in color. And the members have told me they really enjoy it," she said.

As for advice for branches looking to start their own websites, McCormick urges them to take advantage of the technological savvy among their younger members. "[Creating a website] is not as hard as you would think," she said. "It's doable and affordable. And with a website, the sky's the limit on the content you can put out."

When Eugene, OR Branch 916 member **Howard Fuller** was creating a revised branch website from scratch, he had challenges similar to those faced by McCormick—he had a goal for the website, but no practical experience with building one. "It's been a real learning curve," he said. "I'm still trying to figure out some things." Like McCormick, he also turned to the internet for assistance. "I used Google, YouTube—I just tried to cull all the information online," Fuller said.

There's a good reason why Fuller devotes so much time to the branch's site—he believes wholeheartedly in the site's ability to connect with members. "Getting the information out to our members is the most important part of [the website]," he said. "There's a lot of information out there, but not



Opposite page: The website for Greater East Bay, CA Branch 1111

Left: The website for Eugene, OR Branch 916

Right: The website for Columbus, OH Branch 78

Below: The website for Tri-Valley, CA Branch 2902

all of it is relevant to local issues." The branch does post updates on Facebook, he said, but some of the documents that members need access to "aren't very shareable" on that platform.

The branch has had a website for years, but since Fuller built his updated site, nalc916.org, he has constantly tried to improve the website user experience for his fellow members. "I think the hardest thing is trying to make sure that everyone has access without creating a log-in or making people create a user account," he said. "It's still a work in progress."

But Fuller also insists that building a branch website, while time-consuming, "isn't as difficult as people think." He added, "You just have to make sure you dedicate time to update it. The more it gets updated, the more people come to depend and rely on it."

As with McCormick and Fuller, Tri-Valley, CA Branch 2902 member **Larry Orcutt** built his branch website, nalcbranch2902.org, himself. However, Orcutt came to the project with prior experience—he had previously created a personal website. "I approached [the branch officers]" about creating a new website, Orcutt explained, "because I thought it would be a good way to inform members and give them a resource [for information]."

The carrier designed the website to be as convenient as possible for the branch members; in particular, while the site still carries national updates for letter carriers, he felt it was important that the platform also have "things pertaining to our local branch, like the calendar for meetings and all the resources for our stewards."

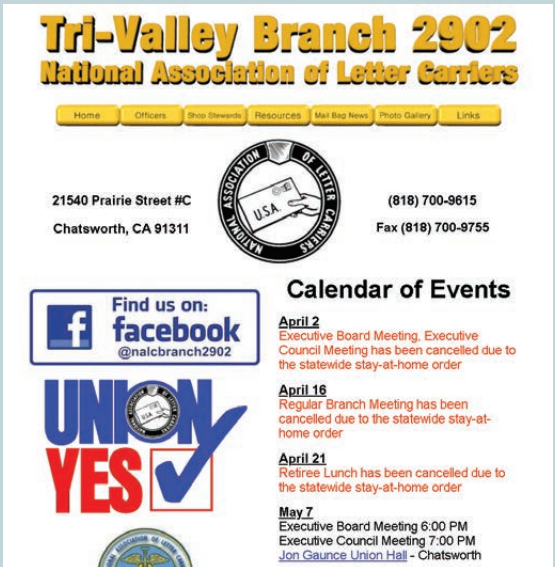
With his experience, Orcutt cautions letter carriers against getting too crazy with web design for their sites. "Keep it simple," he said. "I like [websites] that can be easily navigated... that are user-friendly." An easy mistake, he said, is making your website too flashy. For Orcutt, what makes a website good is when "[people can] see the information they came for."

Unlike with some of the other, recently created branch websites, it is the longevity of the Columbus, OH Branch 78 site that has earned it credibility among members. The website, nalc-branch78.org, was built in 2001 by member **Trevor Payne**, who at the time was trying to simplify the branch's communication tools. "I thought it would be better [for members] to get all of the information in one location," he said.

And yet, despite the site's nearly two decades of success, Payne has never become complacent—he has continually strived to update the platform to match technological progress. The website is on its fourth iteration, including heavy modification in the last 10 years to include the branch's social media platforms.

The website now has a rolling feed that connects to the Branch 78 Twitter page, which Payne updates frequently. But he has the same emphasis on communication that he did when he was just operating the website. "Everything is local," he said. "Everything we update on the website gets tweeted out."

In addition, the Twitter platform allows him to add small, personal branch messages for his followers, including posts about new or retired members. During the coronavirus outbreak, it also has allowed him to quickly inform members about changing plans. In the years he's been running the platforms, he said, he can remember only "100 percent positive feedback" from coworkers.

In this time of fear and uncertainty, it is more vital than ever that NALC members have access to the information they need. These branch websites, along with the other social media outreach done on a local level, help connect and inform letter carriers in a quicker and easier way.

"I thank those members who are working diligently to keep their local websites available and updated," NALC President Fredric Rolando said, "and I encourage other branches to consider starting a branch website or social media presence of their own." **PR**