



Deputize the community

■ WHAT IS IT?

The [Deputy Program](#) at the [Alabama Media Group](#) recruits and trains local residents who provide verified story tips, ask questions and offer perspectives from communities that often go uncovered. The program, launched in 2017, has recruited more than 30 active deputies to connect with communities that include homeless people, undocumented immigrants, prisoners and ex-prisoners. Their contributions have informed stories about topics including [community organizing](#), [the working poor](#) and [voter registration by jail inmates](#).



■ WHO'S BEHIND IT?

The Deputy Program is the brainchild of [Connor Sheets](#), an investigative reporter with AL.com in Birmingham, who developed the [program](#) as a fellow at the [Reynolds Journalism Institute](#) at the University of Missouri. The program uses the text-messaging platform [GroundSource](#). Sheets said the program takes only a small investment of time or money: Two hours per week and \$20 a month or less for messaging.

■ DOES IT WORK?

While the primary result of the Deputy Program is to create better connections between journalists and under-covered communities, participants also [learn](#) about the importance of accuracy and verification in journalism. Significantly, the deputies at AL.com are racially diverse; the American Press Institute says [inclusion is key](#) to gaining trust of new audiences and [improving business models](#) for news.



■ HOW TO DO IT

[Recruitment](#) is important. The Deputy Program recruits people who are already engaged in a geographic or topical community and have strong networks. A low barrier to entry is another important factor: While participants learn to verify information, the project does not ask them to produce actual stories and [GroundSource](#) makes it easy for them to keep in touch. Sheets created this [guide](#) to setting up a Deputy Program.