



GERALD R. FORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
CENTER FOR LOCAL, STATE, AND URBAN POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Annual Report

Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy

2025-2026 Annual Report



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Letter from Our Director

Stephanie Leiser



What a remarkable year of new milestones and new momentum for CLOSUP's mission of public service to Michigan's communities! This year was my first as Director but also the 25th Anniversary of CLOSUP's founding, which we celebrated with a very special event in Lansing in April. We have been inspired by reconnecting with so many of the wonderful people who have contributed their energy and expertise to build CLOSUP's legacy and who continue to share their wisdom as we look to the future.

Looking back over this past year, we see evidence of both our ongoing commitment to rigor and excellence in our core programs - for example, continuing to achieve a 70%+ response rate on the Michigan Public Policy Survey- as well as our desire to innovate and experiment with new ways to fulfill our mission - for example, new opportunities for students and new projects that explore the unique challenges and opportunities in rural communities.

We hope you'll enjoy reading about our projects as much as we enjoy doing this important work!

“

One of the things that makes CLOSUP so special is its statewide reach - from the smallest townships in the UP to our largest city of Detroit—we work with local leaders and our other partners to understand policy challenges and ensure their voices are heard in larger policy conversations on tax policy, energy policy, public health, and everything in between.

- Stephanie Leiser, CLOSUP Director

”



About Us

Mission

The University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) is dedicated to serving local communities in Michigan and beyond. We combine engaged research with collaborative state and local partnerships to build local capacity and strengthen democracy at its grassroots across rural and urban communities.

History

In the late 1990's, Michigan's legislature felt that the state's three main research universities—as semi-autonomous units of the state government—were not providing enough public service to the state, and so it permanently boosted its base-level general fund support to the universities, along with a new mandate to provide more public service. At U-M, this resulted in the creation of CLOSUP, in the fall of 2001.

Since its founding, the Center has been home to research initiatives on a range of policy issues important to the state and its localities, including energy and the environment, criminal justice, transportation, clean water, fiscal health, redistricting, citizen engagement, elections, and much more.





Our Team

The CLOSUP team is a dynamic group of faculty, staff, and students dedicated to serving communities through applied academic research. The team leverages its expertise in areas including public finance and public policy analysis to inform decision-making in municipalities across Michigan.



>> Staff

Left to right:

- **Margaret Walthall**, Research and Data Specialist
- **Stephanie Leiser**, CLOSUP Director
- **Mariam Negaran**, Administrative Coordinator
- **Natalie Fitzpatrick**, Project Manager
- **Debra Horner**, Senior Program Manager



(l-to-r) Ann Wilkinson (MPP '26), Ellie Wilson (MPP '27), Annelise Loveless (MPP '26), Veronica Goonan (MPP '26), Morgan McKimmy (BA '29), John Blake (MPP/SEAS '26), and Ava Hoffman (BA '26)

>> Student Research Assistants

Every year, CLOSUP hires student policy analysts to work on the Michigan Public Policy Survey, Fiscal Health Project, research on rural Michigan, and communications and outreach. In AY 25-26, our students included:

- John Blake (MPP/SEAS '26)
- Veronica Goonan (MPP '27)
- Ava Hoffman (BA '26)
- Joseph Hubert, (BA '26)
- Annelise Loveless (MPP '26)
- Morgan McKimmy (BA '29)
- Maia Morenoff (BA '28)
- Elizabeth Mugo (MPP '26)
- Brandon Romero (Ph.D. '26)
- Tristin Smith (BA '26)
- Chelsea Waddell (Ph.D '27)
- Max Wei (BA '27)
- Ann Wilkinson (MPP/MURP '27)
- Ellie Wilson (MPP '27)



What we do

>> Michigan Public Policy Survey

Launched in 2009, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) gathers information to understand the priorities, perspectives, challenges, and goals for the state's 1,856 general purpose local governments and their communities. The program is a partnership with the state's main associations for local governments: the Michigan Association of Counties, the Michigan Municipal League, and the Michigan Townships Association.

MPPS results and insights are actively cycled back into the policymaking process at both the state and local levels across Michigan. They help local governments make more informed decisions and advocate for their interests at the state level, and they help state policymakers better understand the various challenges and opportunities Michigan's communities face.



In 2019, CLOSUP celebrated 10 years of the MPPS survey.



70%

RESPONSE
RATE

Since 2012, more than 70% of Michigan's 1,856 local governments have responded to each MPPS survey wave



99%

LOCAL
GOVERNMENTS
RESPONDED

Of Michigan's 1,856 local governments, 1,853 have responded to at least one MPPS survey



30

SURVEYS
CONDUCTED

The MPPS has conducted 30 surveys of Michigan's local governments



3,991

ONLINE
DATA TABLES

CLOSUP publishes all MPPS questions and results on its website

“ The MPPS gathers data and opinions from community leaders that blanket the state of Michigan and we're able to bring the information back to policymakers and related stakeholders around state government in Lansing. It's designed as a public service to Michigan communities and the Michigan state government.

- Tom Ivacko, CLOSUP Former Executive Director

”



>> Fiscal Health Project

CLOSUP launched its [Fiscal Health Project](#) in 2019 to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges that local governments face in collecting, using, and interpreting fiscal data, and to promote greater transparency and earlier detection of fiscal stress. Fiscal health is critical because it underlies the ability of local governments to provide public services—from economic development to public safety, social welfare, clean water, and more.

The Fiscal Health Project combines applied research, case studies that facilitate community-engaged learning and research, and unique collaborations with stakeholder and industry leaders to develop technology tools that promote improved fiscal transparency and policymaking.



3

ANNUAL FISCAL HEALTH REPORTS

Since 2024, CLOSUP has produced an annual report assessing the fiscal health of all 1,856 Michigan local governments



8

CASE STUDIES

CLOSUP guides students in engaging with communities to learn about their fiscal challenges and strategies



2

OPEN SOURCE DATA TOOLS

The FHP works with students and industry partners to develop tools to support local government financial transparency



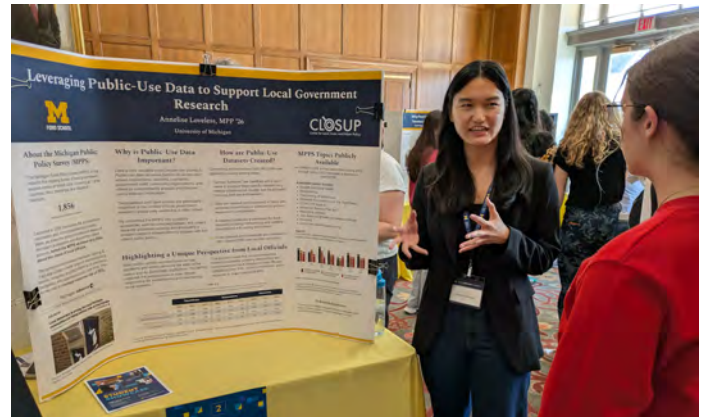
What we do

>> Student Support & Engagement

CLOSUP is enthusiastic about supporting students who are interested in state and local policy. We hire students as policy analysts, support MPP student internships, host events and workshops, and help faculty integrate data into course presentations and curriculum.

In AY25-26, CLOSUP:

- Hired 14 student Policy Analysts, including MPP, BA, and UROP students
- Provided funding to support two MPP student summer internships
- Supported one independent study student
- Co-developed a four-part workshop on grant writing with the International Policy Center Aid & Development program
- Provided mentoring and support for students pursuing jobs in state and local government



NEW THIS YEAR!

Policy Consulting Clinic Pilot Program

CLOSUP worked with other Ford School collaborators to launch a new program that pairs communities with teams of students to work on consulting projects. In its first year, team worked on:

- Public-facing financial report for Brighton, MI
- Examining the impact of power outages in Wayne County
- Exploring housing policy options for the state



New This Year : CLOS-R-UP

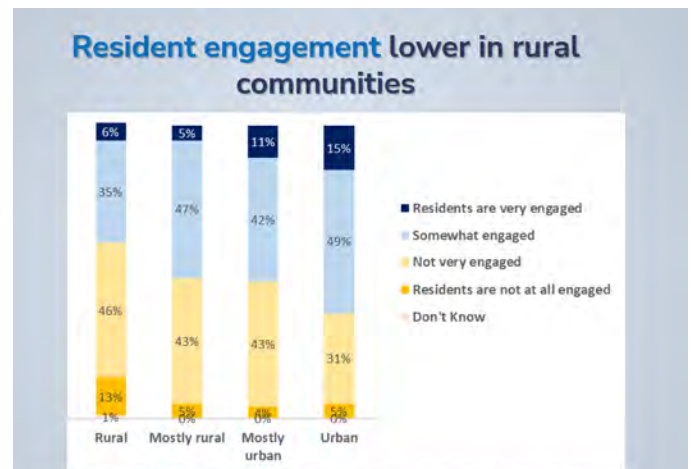


About 20% of Michigan residents live in rural areas. Rural communities face distinct challenges compared to their urban counterparts—especially in economic development, regional collaboration, housing and emergency preparedness. Yet, these communities are often left out of policy conversations.

Our CLOS-R-UP initiative - adding the R for rural - brings together a number of CLOSUP activities to deepen our expertise and partnerships on rural issues.



CLOSUP has partnered with the University of Michigan U.P. Scholars program and the online newsletter Rural Insights to use results from the Michigan Public Policy Survey to understand the unique experiences of local governments in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.



From CLOSUP's presentation at the Michigan Rural Prosperity Summit, April 2026

“One thing we’ve learned from surveying Michigan’s communities for over 15 years is that much more attention needs to be paid to the unique challenges, concerns and strengths of small and rural communities. The voices of rural leaders are often overlooked in policy debates about property taxes, public safety, data centers, et cetera.

- Stephanie Leiser, CLOSUP Director



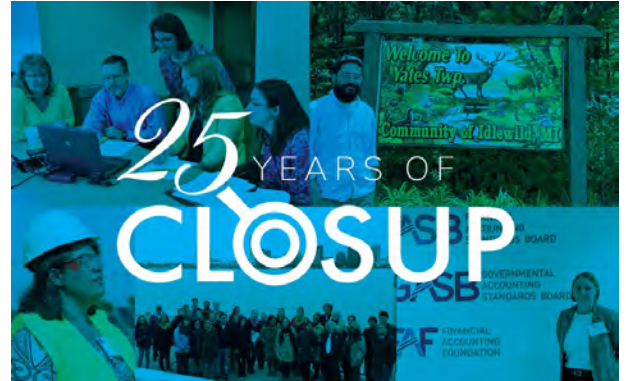


Celebrating 25 Years of CLOSUP

On April 15, 2026, CLOSUP celebrated 25 years of impact. The event brought together current and former CLOSUP staff, students, collaborators, and state policymakers who gathered in Lansing to mark the milestone. Ford School Dean Celeste Watkins-Hayes gave opening remarks, and CLOSUP Director Stephanie Leiser reflected on CLOSUP's history, thanking all our partners who have helped shape the work we do and will continue to do.

[Read more about the milestone here](#)

[Check out the CLOSUP timeline here](#)





Events & Workshops Highlights

Democracy on the Front Lines: Lessons from Michigan Local Governments

In February 2026, CLOSUP hosted a [panel session and conversation with four local government leaders](#) that explored new research on the health of local democracy and ways to encourage resident engagement and participation.

Ford School students networked with the panelists over lunch, followed by the panel and dinner.



Janani Yates (MPP '13) class visit and lunch with students

In February 2026, Ford School alum Janani Yates (MPP '13) spoke with students in Stephanie Leiser's Public Policy 715 class about her career spanning federal government (CFPB), local government (Arlington County, Washington D.C. Detroit), and now private consulting (Watson & Yates).

She encouraged students to consider careers in budgeting/finance because of how central budgeting is to policy and decision making, and gave students tips on what it takes to be a great budget analyst.



Women Leading Local Government: An interactive seminar presented by the Michigan Municipal League

In October 2025, CLOSUP hosted an [interactive panel session](#) featuring women in local government leadership roles. Despite making up half of the population, women represent only 23% of Michigan's local chief administrative officers today.

Students and guests engaged with panelists on municipal issues and learned more about the management profession.



International Policy Center Aid & Development workshop series: Writing Winning Grant Proposals

In September 2025, CLOSUP Director Stephanie Leiser and fellow Ford School faculty member Amy Harris led the International Policy Center's Aid & Development four-part workshop series, focusing on drafting compelling grant proposals, a skill set relevant for both international development- and state and local-focused policy careers.





Presentations & Engagement Highlights

Webinar: Digitizing municipal financial reporting: A new open source tool for Excel - XBRL conversion

In June 2025, at a webinar co-hosted by CLOSUP and the Michigan Open Source Software initiative, CLOSUP Research and Data Specialist Margaret Walthall demonstrated how small local governments and other entities can quickly and easily convert their financial filings into iXBRL format using our free tool. [View the webinar and try the tool here.](#)

This innovation helps make public financial data more accessible, comparable, and actionable - a big step toward smarter governance.



MSU Public Policy Forum - "After ARPA: What's next for MI Schools and Local Governments"

CLOSUP Senior Program Manager Debra Horner, along with fellow panelist, Dr. Bryan Beverly from Michigan State's Office of K-12 Outreach, presented at the October 2025 Public Policy Forum hosted by MSU's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR). The session was titled "After ARPA: What's next for MI Schools and Local Governments." Horner spoke about local government leaders' perspectives on preparing for the end of federal ARPA funding using data from CLOSUP's Spring 2025 Michigan Public Policy Survey.



Michigan Rural Futures Summit Presentation

CLOSUP Project Manager Natalie Fitzpatrick presented at the Michigan Rural Futures Summit in May 2026. The summit was hosted jointly by Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity and Office of Rural Prosperity.

Her presentation shared Spring 2025 MPPS data on civic trust and community perception, highlighting shifts in how residents engage with institutions and one another and how trust shapes leadership, participation, and local progress.





MPPS Accomplishments 2025-2026



72%

RESPONSE
RATE

72% of Michigan's 1,856
local governments responded
to the Spring 2026 MPPS
survey



143

NEW DATA
TABLES

All MPPS questions and
results are posted on
the website



11

MPPS
REPORTS

CLOSUP has published 11
MPPS reports this
academic year

- Partnered with the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) on analysis of Michigan local governments' budgeting practices data from the Spring 2025 survey wave.
- Used grant funding on democracy-related projects and programming, including progress on archiving our [Public/Student use datasets](#) at U-M's ICPSR, the updating of our [Functioning of Democracy Compendium](#) and a panel discussion with local government leaders on MPPS data regarding resident engagement.
- Streamlined our process of providing [online MPPS data tables](#) to improve accessibility and transparency.
- Collaborated with multiple external organizations and researchers on MPPS questionnaire topics and items.
- Oversaw the development of four student papers published at [Rural Insights](#) through the [Close Up on the U.P. program](#).
- Mentored Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) first-year student Morgan McKimmy who won a Blue Ribbon Award for her research using MPPS data.



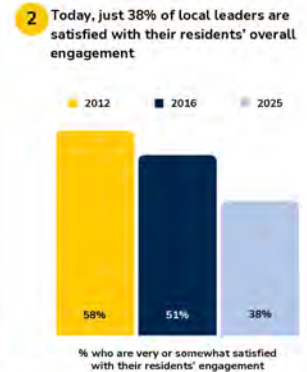
MPPS Featured Findings

Michigan local leaders report alarming declines in resident engagement (October 2025)

This report presents the views of Michigan's local government leaders regarding resident engagement with their local governments, including assessments of the opportunities their local governments provide for engagement, residents' overall levels of engagement, and challenges to their engagement efforts.

Key findings

- Local officials' satisfaction with their residents' overall engagement with their local governments has plummeted, from 58% in 2012 to 38% in 2025.
- Even though local governments have increased their outreach and engagement activities, just 46% of local governments statewide say their residents are somewhat or very engaged, a drop from 65% who said the same in 2012.

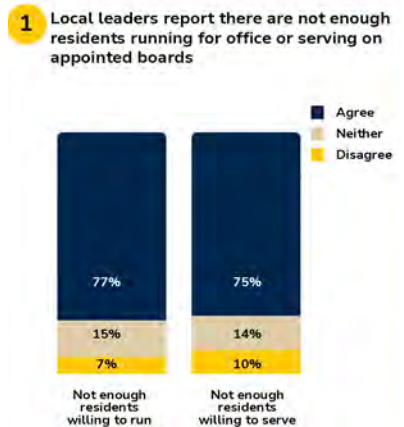


Many Michigan local governments struggle to find residents willing to run for office or serve on boards (April 2026)

This policy brief presents Michigan local government leaders' views on resident engagement in their communities. Across the state, Michigan local leaders report steep declines in engagement over more than a decade, despite increased outreach efforts to their residents. One significant area of concern is resident representation on local elected and appointed boards.

Key findings:

- Statewide, leaders from more than three-quarters of Michigan local governments (77%) say not enough residents are willing to run for elected office and nearly as many note candidacies are often uncontested (75%). A similar proportion of local leaders say not enough residents are willing to serve on appointed boards or committees (75%) and many note they have trouble finding residents with the necessary skills or subject matter expertise for certain appointed boards (68%).

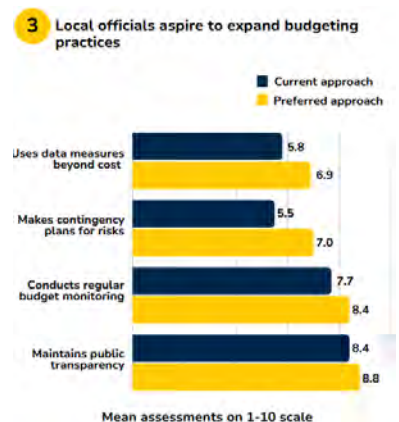


Michigan local governments making progress on best practices in budgeting (May 2026)

This report presents the assessments of Michigan's local government leaders on local budgeting processes, including the prevalence of multi-year budgeting, capital improvement plans (CIPs), long-term financial planning, and views on the appropriate levels of data use, contingency planning, regular budget monitoring, and public transparency. The survey also asked a series of questions about the use of best practices in financial management according to the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), a leading non-profit organization that promotes professional management of governments.

Key findings

- Most Michigan local governments (especially villages and townships) manage annual operating budgets under \$1 million, while just 12% of jurisdictions (mostly counties) oversee budgets over \$10 million.





Fiscal Health Project Featured Findings

The Fiscal Health of Michigan Local Governments 2024

This report provides an overview of Michigan local government fiscal health using financial data reported to the State of Michigan from 2022 to 2024. This analysis evaluates cash, budgetary, long-term, and service solvency indicators for counties, cities, villages, and townships in Michigan.

Key findings

- Michigan local governments generally show strong short-term financial health. However, declining cash reserves, narrowing operating margins, and a growing share of jurisdictions with deficits signal emerging pressures as pandemic-era federal aid winds down.
- Overall, long-term solvency shows modest improvement in the last two years, including declines in debt-to-revenue ratios. However, there are significant disparities by jurisdiction size, with the smallest jurisdictions facing the highest long-term liability burden.



K-12 Education Governance in Michigan

This report presents the findings from a year-long study of K-12 educational governance in Michigan commissioned by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). The research was conducted by researchers and staff at the University of Michigan affiliated with the Youth Policy Lab, Education Policy Initiative, and the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. Throughout the study, MDE leadership offered input, while the UM research team independently determined the topics of inquiry, methods of analyses, and content of the report.

The study focuses on four areas:

- Distribution of authority across state entities and between state and local actors
- School district consolidation
- School choice
- Education finance



Fiscal Health Case Study Series

Students led case studies of fiscal issues in rural communities.

- **Rural Economic Diversification and Fiscal Stability: A Case Study of Lake County, MI** (Yu-yu Lin, MPP/MSW '25 and Steve Kraft, MPP/MSW '25)
- **Legacy, Land, and Unity: A Case Study of Idlewild, Michigan** (Steve Kraft, MPP/MSW '25)
- **Exploring Internal Capacity Building Strategies in Small Municipalities: A Case Study of Evart, Michigan** (Ava Hoffman, BA '26)





Publications - Full List

>> Spring 25 Michigan Public Policy Survey reports

- MPPS Policy Brief: A majority of Michigan local officials continue to say the state is on the wrong track, reflecting partisan affiliation and growing uncertainty (July 2025)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Many Michigan communities concerned about the loss of federal and state funding, but uncertain how to prepare (August 2025)
- Growing consensus among Michigan local government leaders on revenue inadequacy, but declining support for local tax options (September 2025)
- Michigan local leaders report alarming declines in resident engagement (October 2025)
- Michigan local leaders trust residents less, but say that local democracy remains strong (November 2025)
- Smaller and more rural Michigan local governments are struggling with increased fiscal stress (December 2025)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Challenges to Michigan local government budgeting (February 2026)
- MPPS Policy Brief: Many Michigan local governments struggle to find residents willing to run for office or serve on boards (April 2026)
- Michigan local governments making progress on best practices in budgeting (May 2026)

>> Fiscal Health

- The Fiscal Health of Michigan Local Governments 2024 (March 2026)
- K-12 Education Governance in Michigan (July 2025, with Youth Policy Lab)

>> Academic Journal Articles

- Hummel, Daniel, Stephanie Leiser, & James Bourey. (2025). Responding to Decline: The Perspective of City Managers in Shrinking Cities in the United States. *Journal of Urban Affairs*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2025.2461519>.

>> Student Working Papers

- Bridging the Divide: Leadership Perceptions of Law Enforcement–Community Trust (September 2025)
- Balancing Tradition and Technology (October 2025)

>> Student Case Studies

- Rural Economic Diversification and Fiscal Stability: A Case Study of Lake County, MI (September 2025)
- Legacy, Land, and Unity: A Case Study of Idlewild, Michigan (September 2025)
- Exploring Internal Capacity Building Strategies in Small Municipalities: A Case Study of Evart, Michigan (September 2025)



Media Highlights

CLOSUP authored three op-eds and had 70 media mentions, including features in the Detroit Free Press, MLive, WDET, WZZM, Michigan Radio, WTCM, and other media outlets across the state.

Op-eds authored

- 11/19/25 “To shore up American democracy, look to city hall” *London School of Economics United States Politics and Policy*
- Dec 2025 “Township democracy at the grassroots: Reasons for optimism, reasons for concern” *Michigan Township Focus*
- 12/19/25 “Local democracy is holding strong, but rural communities are falling behind, new survey of Michigan officials shows” *The Conversation*

Quotes from other media stories



“Every local government has governing boards and volunteer commissions where important community business must be tackled, but in many communities, the small pool of residents they have to recruit from means they’re often relying on the same people over and over again, or seats just go unfilled.”

- Debra Horner, MLive



“When we’re looking at resident engagement ... rural communities are falling further behind compared to urban communities.”

- Stephanie Leiser, Michigan Public



The property tax in general has pros and cons as a revenue source. It’s relatively stable. It’s relatively predictable. It’s easy to forecast. But it just doesn’t grow. It doesn’t keep up with inflation.

- Stephanie Leiser, Podcast 83



Leiser says Highland Park’s finances are in better shape than they were when officials were considering bankruptcy in 2023. But it still has challenges, such as high property taxes.

- Stephanie Leiser, WDET





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