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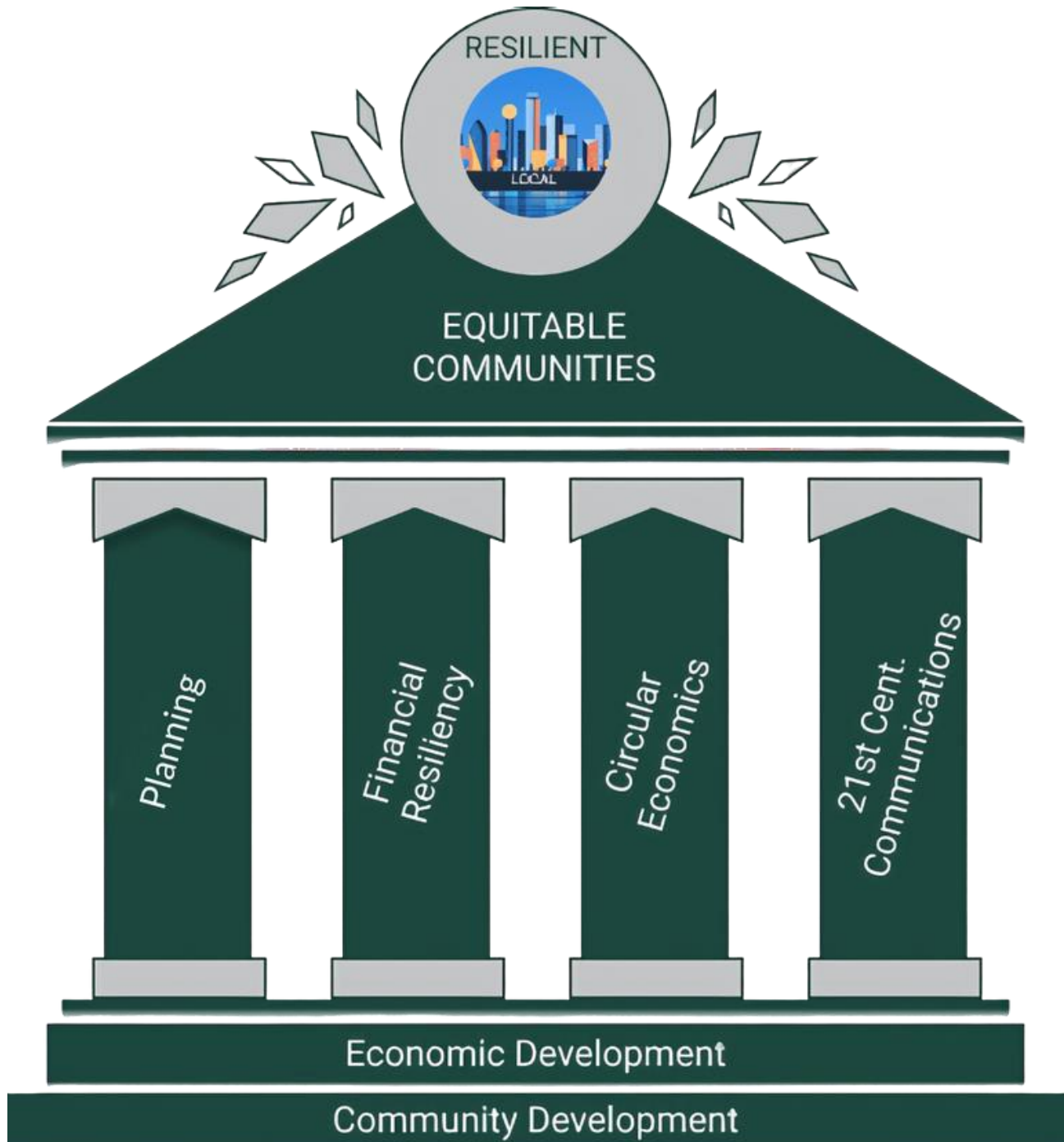
RESILIENT

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COMMUNITIES

Planning

Financial
Resiliency

Circular
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21st Cent.
Communications

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Community Development

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The official bi-annual newsletter of the CCED

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SEASON'S GREETINGS

Health Zones Update

Mary ZumBrunnen
Assistant Director, CCED

Over the course of July 2024-2025, the Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Community & Economic Development (CCED) examined factors affecting low-income senior populations within Ingham County utilizing AmeriCorps*Volunteer in Service to America support. Whittling down county boundaries, VISTA member Courtney Luong dialed in on nine opportunity zones, or low-income census tracts, as identified by the U.S. Department of Treasury and overlayed concepts derived from the work of American author Dan Buettner, summarized in the Netflix documentary, *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones,* throughout her service.

Overview of Blue Zones: In 2005, American author Dan Buettner and Belgian demographer Michael Poulain teamed up to discover the secrets to living a longer life by studying regions where an exceptional number of people live beyond 100. Interviewing centenarians in Okinawa Prefecture in Japan, the Ogliastria Province of Sardinia in Italy, the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, the island of Icaria in Greece and Loma Linda, California, Buettner and Poulain labeled these regions "Blue Zones" and identified nine different "lifestyle habits" that may contribute to a longer and healthier life. Their focus areas included: movement, purpose, stress, bodily intake including both diet and nutrition, socialization, community, sense of belonging and relationships.

In the years since, the concept of Blue Zones and the nine habits associated with them have become subjects of scrutiny. One public health expert described Buettner and Poulain's work as "standard public health promotion 101," and indicated that they missed the mark on key areas like alcohol consumption and smoking (Amigo, 2024). Other critics point out that many Blue Zones are poor, rural areas and that their high numbers of centenarians may be caused by unreliable record keeping. In fact, with improved data collection, life expectancy actually declined in some Blue Zones.

In 2017, Poulain and Buettner ended their partnership. However, since, Buettner has monetized the concept of Blue Zones, founding "Blue Zones LLC," as a planning firm offering their services to municipalities, employers, and other organizations, promising to reshape communities in accordance with Blue Zones' healthy lifestyle attributes. As an example, to create a plan for Fort Worth, Texas, in 2017, the city paid Blue Zones, LLC over $50 million (Roca, 2017). While there may be a level of disconnect between accurate reporting as well as lifestyle attributions and their influencing factors, researchers at the Center desired to see if any of the nine related factors could be assessed and positively influenced for those very vulnerable seniors (65+) living within the identified low-income census tracts of Ingham County known as "opportunity zones."

Defining Social Well-being and Quality of Life

To help build a methodological framework to conduct this exploration beginning in July of 2024, the CCED team established a community advisory board drawing on the expertise of leaders from organizations including the MSU College of Human Medicine, MSU Age Alive, MSU Office of Public Engagement and Scholarship, MSU Computational Math, Science and Engineering, MSU Outreach & Engagement, University of Michigan Health-Sparrow, the Greater Lansing Food Bank, Community Mental Health Authority, East Lansing Prime Time, City of Lansing, Ingham County Health Department, Ingham County Land Bank and the Ingham County Office of the Treasurer as well as Tri-County Office on Aging, Capital Area District Libraries and Kiwanis Club.

Additionally, the team consulted government officials from Fort Worth, Texas and Barry County, Michigan who had previously undertaken efforts to improve their community well-being utilizing the Blue Zones model with related non-profit partners. In Fort Worth, Texas, a Blue Zones Project team was contracted to support helping the community connect, inspiring and reinforcing healthy habits as well as helping develop a new focus on people, places and policy including international researchers from universities such as Oxford. In Barry County, Michigan, a team from the Blue Zones Project was also contracted to support the development of community gardens as the beginning to a more localized food system that also positively influenced movement and socializing.

Following these informal municipal representative interviews, it was found that some of the same

purposes were already being pursued (though by many other means) in Ingham County within overlapping projects that were not necessarily collectively tracked for impact analysis. It was also found that the Blue Zones, LLC price was unaffordable, yet many tools and resources including a Tier 1 research institute's support, were already "in the backyard" at Michigan State University. Based on these conversations, CCED researchers set out to examine the ecosystem of vulnerable seniors within opportunity zones of Ingham County. To begin, the advisory board helped develop contextually-specific and community-identified definitions of social well-being and quality of life to work from.

These were formed starting with the United National Sustainable Development Goals (sdgs.un.org/goals, 2025) as discussion points and conducting significant conversation amongst advisory board members to reach agreement. The working definitions are ultimately reflected as:
1. Social Well-Being: the measurement of feeling connected and finding purpose within an individual's social environment and relationships with others.
2. Quality of Life: an individual's perception of their life when thinking about their surroundings, culture, and social determinants of health in relation to their aspirations and goals.

Health Zone Areas of Assessment
Recognizing some of the limitations and un-affordability of working directly with Blue Zones, LLC, the research team, with support and input of the community advisory board, also set out to create a refined list of seven focus areas and potential variables tailored to the unique needs of seniors in Ingham County utilizing the Blue Zones foci as a starting point. These were drilled down to reflect:

1. Accessible housing and indicators such as rates of homelessness, eviction, and overcrowding; cost-burdened households, rental/homeownership affordability, and availability/utilization of housing assistance.
2. Affordable healthcare and indicators such as rates of under/uninsured, out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, healthcare delayed or foregone due to cost, prescription drug affordability, medical debt, provider availability, and health facility distance and travel time.
3. Mental health and indicators such as days of poor mental health, self-reported mental health, prevalence of mental disorders, mental health provider availability, mental health treatment utilization, suicide rates, and emergency department hospitalizations for mental health disorders.
4. Access to transportation with indicators such as percentage of populations living within a quarter mile of a transit stop, walkability and bikeability scores, affordability of transit fares, and availability of subsidies.
5. Food and nutrition with indicators including household food security status, proximity to grocery stores and farmers markets, availability of fresh produce, fruit and vegetable consumption, overweight/obesity rates, and prevalence of diabetes and diet-related diseases.
6. Connectivity with indicators including frequency of social contacts, living alone, civic engagement and volunteering, membership in social organizations, and access to and use of social media.

7.   Access to parks and recreation centers with indicators such as distance to, and affordability of, local parks and recreation centers and their perceived safety.
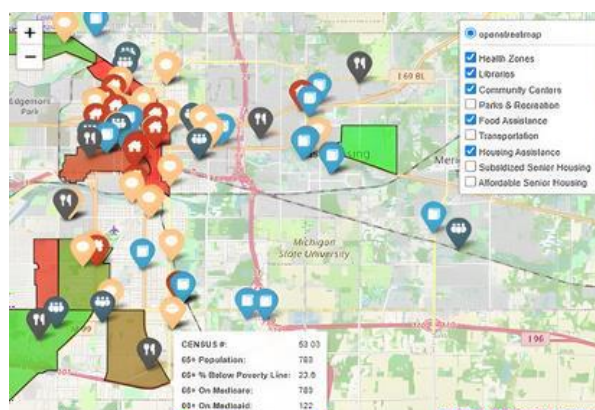
Ecosystem Mapping

To help identify gaps and barriers to thriving within each of the seven health foci, the Health Zones team worked with an MSU Computational, Mathematics, Science, and Engineering senior capstone group of students to develop an ecosystem map. This ecosystem map is a grouping of layered map slices that viewers may choose to turn on and off based on the legend. Figure 1 below provides an example of what the map might look like when multiple items in the legend are "on" simultaneously for real-time viewing.

Jointly utilizing publicly available datasets and Python-based data processing libraries, the team cleaned, analyzed, and mapped key health-related access points on a geographic level. The final product included the map in Figure 1 that enables users, such as public health officials and policymakers, to explore spatial trends in access to health-related services or tools to help inform social and physical determinants of health outcomes. This tool aimed to provide insights for data-driven decision-making and resource allocation in the Ingham County area.

Figure 1: MSU Healthy City Assessment Map Example
Developed by Noah Mueller, Amaan Thasin, Frank Luginbill, and Jun Han, 2025

Following, student researchers further fleshed out a layered ecosystem map of resources that helps illuminate accessibility within opportunity zones to resources such as: housing, affordable healthcare, mental health, transportation, nutrition, connectivity, and greenspace. The study wrapped up with a Lansing-area focus group hosted by the Allen Neighborhood Center bringing to light additional topics of concern for elderly, low-income residents that included: public safety, responsiveness of elected officials, services for unhoused populations and home improvement aid.

Throughout the first year of the Health Zones project, the research team and advisory board worked together to conduct research, outreach, and engagement regarding the different issues contributing to

to social and physical wellbeing. In combination with the Opportunity Zones identification as bounded areas of research within Ingham County, the reduced foci of accessible housing, affordable healthcare, mental health, access to transportation, food and nutrition, connectivity, and access to parks and recreation centers served as the basis for the ecosystem project resource map. This visual representation of data was a crucial tool for the research team as they worked to identify spatial, social, and economic focus areas for the Health Zones project. However, the ease of usability and access are difficult to navigate with limited software and file access.

Wrapping up her term of service, VISTA member Courtney Luong also helped facilitate a senior coffee hour focus group plus dialogue at the Allen Neighborhood Center. When the research team spoke with focus group participants to learn how these issues manifested themselves in the lives of community seniors, a focused snapshot of Lansing's health disparities became to varying degrees clearer and simultaneously murkier. Seniors referenced many of the same issues identified in the Health Zones' seven foci, but tied them together as symptoms of crime, homelessness, and a passive local government. It is unknown if these trends are merely perceived, or if the challenges faced by vulnerable seniors stem from a public safety crisis and less responsive local government.

To learn which areas can be targeted to most effectively achieve better health outcomes and quality of life for seniors in Ingham opportunity zones, it is recommended that the study continues into year two and three for additional focus group assessment, and that the AmeriCorps*VISTA project be funded in support of these efforts for an additional two years. Continued research into social well-being and quality of life through the seven indicators will also help lay the foundation for future efforts that forge collaborative partnerships supporting more reciprocal dialogue between leaders in healthcare, housing, nutrition, and local communities for positive outcomes. The Center will continue to pursue funding in efforts to continue this project and expand focus groups throughout the county at senior centers and dining halls within the nine identified opportunity zone low-income census tracts.

Artificial Intelligence & Economic Development:

THE PROMISES & THE PERILS

Manuel Chavez, PhD

Guest Author, MSU Julian Samora Research Institute, MSU School of Journalism

Business news has been busy providing information about how artificial intelligence will increase the overall wellbeing of communities across the country – including the creation of jobs. While the promises of AI are important to recognize and to be open for, it is important to be cognizant of the risks and the overestimations of job creation. Technology companies are fiercely competing to develop generative machine learning models that can translate into activities that emulate human tasks and activities and of course make our lives easier. The job opportunities are not only on the programming of machines but also on the data centers that will house computers/servers. The assumption that AI will produce jobs is, indeed, not flawed, - it will create jobs but not in the numbers that many CEOs and politicians proclaim.

At a closer look, it is clear that Michigan economic development will benefit from increasing efficiency and productivity of tasks that are repetitive. This will have an impact on manufacturing jobs and in some white-collar jobs. AI is likely to program, test, readapt, and reprogram the roles and duties that those workers operate. More importantly, AI is likely to increase the discovery of new alternatives and techniques in biotechnology, technology, information management, and robotics. When analyzing economic development in Michigan, especially in cities like Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Lansing, the potentials for community and economic development are good for small and medium size businesses, and of course for large manufactures - such as the auto industry and EV battery production. Companies working on autonomous driving technologies will certainly benefit from the significant code development needed. Corporations aiding external technology needed to guide vehicles across roads will benefit from AI speed and generative process. And if major US tech companies decide to locate or increase their activities in Michigan, it is likely that they will need more energy. It is important to be prepared to provide that energy to maintain operational AI facilities.

For community and economic development planning, AI will facilitate the identification of needs, models, and assessments to attract and facilitate good jobs creation. Economic planners will be able to assist companies to plan for strategies that other similar size cities have already implemented and have a record of success. Similarly, AI will help to identify the flaws, pitfalls, and obstacles that cities faced during the implementation. Strategies will benefit from having more information available to propose a plan that has better chances to succeed. Knowing tested requirements that include taxes, financing, public-private partnerships, evaluation models, and the type and number of skilled workers will benefit Michigan cities.

Two major implications of AI for Michigan economic development are coming within the next five years, the first one is related to the impacts on the current jobs and businesses operating in Michigan. This means that most functions and activities will be exposed to AI to optimize efficiency and productivity. The advancement of machine learning will produce ways that simplify tasks as computers perform more rapidly than humans. This may induce companies to reduce their labor force to a minimum that is able to manage daily operations. And the second one is related to how AI will impact the next round of jobs in the state and in the country beyond those five years, looking specifically on types of jobs, areas, skills, and salaries. One positive side is that AI will help communities and economic development planners to make reliable assessments of private-public partnerships, optimal government tax incentives and investments, favorable zoning, and better predictions on job impacts and trends.

It is unclear the real impact of AI on job creation and wages. An example of how jobs may be impacted by AI is the announcements of job cuts. By the end of October major U.S. corporations announced the elimination of 153,000 jobs (Bloomberg, 2025). Specifically, Amazon announced an initial layoff of 14,000 workers with the plan of cutting another 16,000 jobs, that is a reduction of 10% of their labor force (McLain, 2025). Also, Intel announced that they were laying off 7,000 staff members or 15% of their labor force, while UPS plans to lay off 20,000 workers or 4% of their workforce (Chapman, 2025). Bloomberg News reported that the reasons for the layoffs were in part due to AI integration or the readjustment of jobs' tasks. The potential consequences of AI on economic development include the possibility of overestimating the creation of jobs at all levels, for both blue- and white-collar workers. In the very near future, humans will have a formidable task to verify AI outputs to ensure that results are actually the consequence of verifiable inputs.

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Scaling Deep & Community/Economic Development

Robert Brown

Associate Director, CCED

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I recently read Tatiana Fraser's 2025 report, *Scaling Deep: Shifting Power and Redefining Success*, after hearing about it through weekly conversations in the Strategic Doing Institute's Council of Elders, where I serve on the board. For years I have used Strategic Doing as a practical discipline for guiding complex collaborations in communities, especially around what some call "wicked problems." Wicked problems are the kinds of issues that don't have clear boundaries or straightforward solutions, where every attempt to make progress reveals new layers of complexity and interconnected challenges. Reading Fraser's work allowed me to process what I already practice through a deeper and more value-based lens.

Strategic Doing provides a clear and agile framework for moving networks toward measurable

FROM THE EDITORS:

This article on Scaling Deep heavily uses Artificial Intelligence, so we asked the author: Does the use of AI impact your feelings about writing and about Scaling Deep itself?

Here's his answer:

The use of AI does not negatively impact my feelings about writing or Scaling Deep. I find AI very helpful. In much of my work, I am trying to deeply understand, disseminate, and use concepts like Scaling Deep. AI increases my ability to do all three. I do not use AI for my original writing.

I am aware, however, that AI presents challenges. As with many technological innovations, societal norms and ethics lag behind, which can lead to misuse.

outcomes through simple rules, thirty-day action cycles, and opportunity focused questions such as "What would it look like if…?" *Scaling Deep*, meanwhile, invites us to examine the cultural, relational, and personal shifts that make those actions durable. The more I read Fraser's work, the more I could see how these two approaches fit together. Strategic Doing activates networks while Scaling Deep transforms the underlying norms and values that shape how those networks behave.

Tatiana Fraser is a long-time systems change leader and feminist practitioner, and the co-founder of The Systems Sanctuary, a place of support for people leading systemic change. Over her three decades of work, which include global speaking engagements, and leadership awards, she created her signature Scaling Deep framework that offers a pathway for lasting systemic change by focusing on cultural and personal transformation rather than growth for its own sake. The framework encourages people and organizations to strengthen relationships, shift beliefs and norms, and move at a pace that honors context and complexity.

Community and Economic Development through a Deep Scaling Lens

According to AI, community and economic development using Scaling Deep would look like a long term, place-based strategy that draws from local assets and strong partnerships. Instead of rapid expansion or growth driven by external investors, Scaling Deep emphasizes distinctive local enterprises, stronger community identity, and wealth that stays within the community. Key characteristics and outcomes of this approach include a strong emphasis on local resources, with development shaped by local talent, heritage, and the unique strengths of the community. It focuses on building local wealth so households can remain in place and benefit directly from revitalization efforts. Scaling Deep also strengthens local identity by supporting distinctive businesses and community gathering places that reflect the character of the area. Successful implementation requires trusting partnerships and collaboration across sectors, which help create sustainable, long-term impact as businesses and initiatives become deeply embedded in the community. This approach offers tailored support to small and community rooted entrepreneurs and pays close attention to underlying structures that shape values and behaviors, rather than simply creating new programs. Over time, it connects with broader strategies so communities can share practices and insights across regions in meaningful and mutually supportive ways.

A Deeper Dive

Scaling Deep is a long term, community driven approach that centers cultural, relational, and structural transformation. It emphasizes the cultivation of local assets and the strengthening of social fabric to create sustainable prosperity. In practice, success is defined by how deeply an initiative becomes embedded in local life, rather than how widely it spreads. This approach uplifts existing community strengths and treats relationship building as essential infrastructure. Decision-making remains community centered and includes diverse local voices, so solutions grow from the complexities of place. Scaling Deep also focuses on shifts in mindsets and values, which over time influence institutions and policy. It encourages the development of locally distinctive enterprises that reflect a community's heritage and identity. Above all, it requires a long-term commitment, growing slowly and steadily, with roots that deepen like an oak tree.

Why This Matters for Community and Economic Development

Current approaches in the field experience persistent problems such as unequal distribution of growth, limited local capacity, inadequate infrastructure, low community participation in decision-making, and heavy reliance on short-term, market driven strategies. Residents of under-resourced communities often do not benefit from overall growth, and many communities lack the staff, funding, and structural support needed to create lasting change. Scaling Deep challenges these norms. It encourages a shift from older models rooted in hierarchy and control to approaches grounded in relationship, collaboration, shared power, and innovation.

Dr. Rex LaMore

Director, CCED

Over 90 Michigan planners attended the session organized by Mr. Henry Jerred, CCED Research Assistant and Dr. Rex LaMore, CCED Director, at the Michigan Association of Planning's Annual Conference on Oct 23rd discussing Michigan's PA 233 and the potential this recently enacted law may have to advance community benefit agreements and material salvage and reuse through decommissioning of renewable energy facilities.

On October 23rd, CCED Director Dr. Rex LaMore and Research Assistant Henry Jerred presented at the Michigan Association of Planning's (MAP's) annual Planning Michigan Conference. Their session, "The Changing Role of Planning: Host Community Agreements and Decommissioning Policies," explored shifting decision-making power and new opportunities for community development brought about by Michigan's recently implemented Public Act 233. The legislation establishes new processes for siting renewable energy and storage facilities, allowing state planners to "leapfrog" local authority in certain circumstances. Notably, PA 233 includes provisions for host community agreements--similar to community benefit agreements--and introduces decommissioning policies, requiring developers to fund the disassembly of infrastructure

at its end of life. LaMore and Jerred discussed how local government can wield these provisions within a circular economy framework to negotiate better outcomes, manage risk, and ensure developments are beneficial and sustainable. Their session generated strong interest and will hopefully inform future planning efforts across the state.

CD PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

John Melcher

Associate Director, CCED

Wow, what a year 2025 has been. A lot has changed for many of us this year and 2026 promises even more and swifter changes. For many, the changes have brought great disruption and hardship, for others new opportunities. No matter which is true for you, in times like these it is important to have a way to make the best decision you can with the best information that is available to you at the time. In our work here at the Center for Community and Economic Development we rely on a set of "principles of good practice" to help guide us in our decision-making and actions. These principles were first developed by the Community Development Society in 1985 and have undergone several revisions since that time. There are eight principles, each with its own set of challenges and opportunities. These include: 1) Co-Learning, 2) Collaboration, 3) Community-Driven Practice, 4) Community Power, 5) Dignity within Diversity, 6) Economic Autonomy, 7) Social Justice, and 8) Sustainability. The reason I am referencing these principles is that I would like to identify one of these principles that I could focus on in 2026 as part of my volunteer life. I am asking you to help me identify the principle I will focus on by following this link to a survey where you will find a brief description of the principles and the opportunity to vote for your choice: https://forms.gle/MiCLnAL7yXrKfdXL9

Thank you to those of you who will take the time to vote and good luck to everyone in 2026!

Innovate Michigan! Summit 2025 Recap: Innovation & Collaboration

The annual *Innovate Michigan!* Summit and Michigan Inventors Coalition (MIC) Expo took place on Thursday, August 14th, at the Kellogg Conference Center in Lansing. Nearly 300 people attended both events, creating space for collaboration, networking, and the exchange of new ideas.

This year's agenda featured a wide variety of sessions, beginning with opening remarks from Dr. Rex LaMore, Director of MSU's Center for Community and Economic Development, and Dr. Doug Gage, MSU Vice President of Research and Innovation. A highlight of the morning included a keynote fireside chat with Dr. Sarah Gretter, Director of the Apple Developer Academy and launch lead of MSU's Apple Manufacturing Academy, who spotlighted upcoming Apple Manufacturing sessions. Throughout the day, participants engaged in eight sessions - including two sessions eligible for AICP Certification Maintenance credits. Topics included the use of AI to strengthen coalitions and bring upskilling opportunities to Detroit neighborhoods, efforts to connect Flint's small businesses to corporate procurement through the

Jenan Jondy

REI Project
Coordinator, CCED

"BuyFlint Initiative," and strategies for addressing agricultural workforce and infrastructure shortages through innovation centers. Sessions also examined the role of community investment funds, innovative approaches to infrastructure expansion (shared water and sewer infrastructure) in Northwest Michigan, and the importance of partnerships and resilience as shared by REI Innovation Fellows. The day closed with a student-led presentation on the strategic investment planning project along Warren's Van Dyke Corridor. Attendees also celebrated the MIC Pitch Contest during the evening reception. A key feature of the Summit was the Ideas to Innovation rating, where attendees

helped identify the most promising strategies to create or retain jobs in Michigan's economically distressed communities. These ratings will be reviewed by REI's Consultative Panel of experts and will help inform the 2026 call for proposals—pending funding availability. The call remains uncertain, as the EDA University Center program remains under review by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

The day concluded with the REI & MIC Reception, where attendees celebrated innovation and connection while learning the results of the MIC Pitch Contest. To learn more about this year's REI projects: https://reicenter.org/projects/current-projects

Critical Update: The Future of REI

Jenan Jondy

REI Project Coordinator, CCED

For more than a decade, the MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) has delivered impact statewide - over $68 million in economic impact, more than 190 projects in 46 counties, and engagement with over 7,000 stakeholders. Through applied research, technical assistance, and innovation-driven partnerships, REI has advanced MSU's land-grant mission, strengthened community capacity, and provided high-impact learning experiences for students.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) has officially notified Michigan State University's Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) that Fiscal Year 2025–26 funding for the University Center program has been "paused" due to budget constraints.

This decision is not a reflection of REI's performance. On the contrary, EDA has recognized the important contributions of University Centers in driving regional job creation, fostering innovation, and supporting community and business expansion. While we are deeply disappointed by the abrupt termination of this longstanding federal partnership, MSU's commitment to the important work of REI and our many partners across the state will continue. Recognizing the strategic value of REI in advancing community and economic development with distressed communities in our state and with the support of on and off campus partners we anticipate being able to complete our proposed scope of work for 2025-26. We intend to honor to the extent feasible our commitment to the communities and partners who have worked alongside us to advance inclusive economic development across Michigan. We are profoundly grateful for your continued partnership during this transition. Together, we have built a strong foundation of innovation and collaboration that we intend to sustain and grow, even as our program adapts to this new landscape.

We ask our partners and supporters to reach out to your U.S. Senators and Representatives to share the positive impact REI has had in your community and emphasize the importance of this unique program. Your voice is critical in ensuring Michigan's communities continue to have access to innovation-focused economic development support.

Transformative Mentoring: A Bridge to Opportunity

Kevin L. Brooks, PhD

Community Engagement Specialist, CCED

On October 3rd, Dr. Kevin Brooks, the new community engagement specialist at the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development, presented to high school students during a 'Lunch and Learn' hosted by Capital Area Michigan Works!, Peckham, and the Lansing School District. His presentation focused on transformative topics including principles of personhood, community engagement, community development, and good practice, highlighting how individual and collective growth are interconnected. To bridge these, Dr. Brooks reflects on how he found fulfillment through philosophies based in Black/Africana Studies, which has a significant focus on academic excellence, social responsibility, and cultural grounding. He emphasized the importance of having an optimal worldview, where the principles of Ankh (Life), Maat (Harmony), and Wedjau (Wellbeing) work together to shape purposeful experiences. Furthermore, he describes how the Black Studies Paradigm, consisting of centeredness, critical analysis, and empowerment, can be used as a framework to create transformative change. His message promotes self-esteem, resilience, and the importance of supporting each other. By fostering a positive mindset and investing in themselves and their peers, students learn that they can build strong, connected, and cohesive communities. Speaking openly about the challenges students face approaching adulthood, Dr. Brooks encouraged students to practice self-determination, agency, and humility when collaborating with members of their communities. He expressed the importance of growing confident in your character and standing with integrity, exercising emotional maturity to reconcile with people, and practicing self-awareness to look back at situations and integrate learning. He stressed students to leverage their strengths and create a safe space for others to share lived experiences for more comprehensive understanding and engagement. These inclusive communication skills and practices will develop students into career-ready adults. Dr. Brooks works to connect with students to spark meaningful conversations, and the result is impactful engagement. This presentation is a reminder that cultivating connections and having open conversations are important factors for people to grow collectively into resilient communities and are necessary when creating a bridge to opportunities.

The CCED Welcomes Third Cohort of Urban Community Engagement Fellows

The Center for Community and Economic Development selected seven MSU graduate students for the third cohort of the Urban Community Engagement Fellows (UCEF) Program in 2025. The UCEF Program is a joint initiative between The Graduate School and University Outreach and Engagement and connects a multidisciplinary team of researchers with Lansing community organizations for the co-creation of place-based projects in Southwest Lansing. The Fellows represent a variety of academic disciplines and apply asset building community development principles to establish, support, and sustain generative and reciprocal collaborations for mutual benefit and transformative change. Following, an introduction to each fellow shares a brief bio and the projects they're working on.

Meet the 2025-2026 Urban Community Engagement Fellows

Simone E. Bibbs (she/her/hers) is a Doctor of Philosophy student in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in Diversity, Youth, and Family Development in the College of Social Sciences at Michigan State University. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Kentucky in 2022. Simone's research draws on critical and culturally grounded developmental frameworks to explore how race and gender shape the lived experiences and well-being of Black children and adolescents across family, educational, and socio-cultural contexts. Her work centers on the ways Black youth resist racialized and gendered oppression while celebrating their joy, strength, creativity, and imagination.

Simone E. Bibbs

Grace Densham

Grace Densham is a fifth-year student in the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture/Master of Environmental Design (BLA/MED) Dual Degree Program in the School of Planning, Design and Construction in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. Grace will receive a BLA in Fall 2025 and earn an MED with a specialization in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems in Spring 2026. She enjoys identifying plants, creating art, and watching her leopard gecko, Mavis.

Sam Durgy is a fifth-year student in the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture/Master of Urban and Regional Planning (BLA/MURP) Dual Degree Program in the School of Planning, Design and Construction in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. Sam has worked for the MSU Infrastructure Planning and Facilities for more than three years as the Student Aide to the Campus Landscape Architect and has had additional internships where he has gained community engagement experience. He is particularly interested in equitable land use planning and placemaking to help form vibrant communities.

Sam Durgy

Dominic Hateka is a Doctor of Philosophy student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education in the College of Education at Michigan State University. His research explores decolonial integrations in education, with a particular focus on multiliterate cultural artifacts in school and museum spaces. He serves as a Graduate Research Assistant for the Community-Situated Data Practices in Multiethnic, Youth-Led Research Partnerships at MSU and is a researcher with the Toolbox Dialogue Initiative Center. Dominic has extensive experience in higher education, currently teaching Visual Arts Education and Introduction to Arts in the Classroom at MSU.

Dominic Hateka

Wasenka Hewage is a Master of Social Work student in the School of Social Work with a focus on clinical social work. Wasenka is an advocate for mental health awareness and believes successful community engagement is rooted in active listening, empathy, and a genuine commitment to addressing the unique needs of each community. She is passionate about fostering connections and empowering communities to thrive through collaboration, inclusivity, accountability, and empowerment, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes for individuals, organizations, and society. Wasenka is dedicated to community-driven change, bridging the gap between organizations and the diverse communities they serve.

Wasenka Hewage

Prince Gyebi Owusu

Prince Gyebi Owusu is a Doctor of Philosophy candidate in Human Development and Family Studies with a concentration in Child Development in the College of Social Sciences at Michigan State University. His research focuses on the cross-cultural adaptation and validation of child developmental screening tools, as well as the development of culturally responsive interventions for children with disabilities and their families in low-resource settings. Prince is also co-founder and Director of Organizational Development at the Center for Learning and Childhood Development–Ghana (CLCD), a research-driven nonprofit organization that works to improve early childhood outcomes through community-based programs, policy advocacy, and multisectoral collaboration.

Mariam Turkey is a Master of Public Health candidate in the College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University, where she also earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Human Behavior and Social Sciences. Her work focuses on understanding behavior, systems, and the social determinants that shape health outcomes. Mariam's professional experiences reflect a deep commitment to both higher education and public health. She has served in multiple student support and leadership roles, including as a Project Assistant in MSU's Office of Undergraduate Education and as an Iris Scholar with the Health & Risk Communication Center.

Mariam Turkey

Hello's & Welcome to the Team!

Meet CCED's Newest Researchers

Alayla Milow

Alayla Milow is a senior at Michigan State University majoring in Communication with a concentration in mediated communication. Growing up in Flint, MI, Alayla saw firsthand how media can be used as a tool to elevate marginalized voices. The global attention her hometown received during the Flint Water Crisis inspired her to pursue media as a platform for advocacy and change. In her position as Research Assistant at the Center for Community and Economic Development, Alayla is excited to promote the University's resources, highlight the work of the Center, and collaborate closely with the Urban Community Engagement Fellows and other Lansing-based initiatives to foster meaningful community engagement and impactful change. She is also an active member of the Undergraduate Communication Association and works with the Office of Student Success in the College of Social Science at MSU, where she helps promote educational resources that support student achievement. In her free time, Alayla enjoys sewing as well as watching and analyzing movies and reality TV, to better understand culture, storytelling, and media influence.

Gabriella Tobbe is a second-year undergraduate at Michigan State University, studying Finance at Eli Broad College of Business, and plans to pursue a minor in real estate. With hands-on experience in data analytics and market research, along with interests in asset and financial management, Gabriella is passionate about leveraging her skills to promote sustainable investment strategies and a more circular future. Gabriella began her position as a Research Assistant at the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development in October of 2025. Currently, she is working to support the Domicology Research Team to spread awareness about Domicology in general, and promote community visibility for information on the process of transforming the current wasteful linear building practices to a more sustainable, circular system. In the future, Gabriella hopes to explore how sustainable financial models can support both commercial real estate development and building restoration efforts, ensuring that new and older structures alike minimize waste and maximize long-term value. In her spare time, Gabriella enjoys pilates, ballet, thrifting, and reading.

Gabriella Tobbe

Abby Carrigan

Abby Carrigan is a senior at Michigan State University studying Social Relations & Policy, with minors in Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems, Environments & Health, and Human, Environmental, & Economic Geography. Motivated by her love for sustainable relationships with land and the environment, Abby is passionate about fostering community-based approaches to equitable and resilient development. Her academic work bridges social science, environmental policy, and spatial analysis to explore how land use decisions, economic systems, and local governance shape community well-being.

Abby began her position as a Research Assistant at the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development in August 2025, where she works on the Circular Economy Research Team. In this role, she helps spread awareness and inform policy on how Michigan can strengthen its transition toward a regenerative, low-waste economy. Her work supports statewide collaboration between local governments, businesses, and community organizations to build systems that reduce waste, create local economic opportunity, and improve environmental resilience.

In addition to her work at MSU, Abby is employed by Livingston County, where she contributes to long-term planning efforts often centered on sustainability and rural vitality. She recently received the Michigan Association of Planning's Outstanding Undergraduate Student Project Award for her work in writing Livingston County's Sustainable Agriculture, Food Systems, and Rural Environments Plan. This plan emphasizes the protection of agricultural land, supporting local food systems, and guiding smart growth in rural communities in accordance with community values.

Outside of her professional and academic work, Abby is involved in local historic preservation efforts and land conservation programs. Across all aspects of her work, she is striving to connect data-driven research, community-based planning tools, and inclusive policy strategies to advance sustainable development and empower local communities.

Goodbye and Well Wishes!

Thank You, Sonya Koenig

Sonia Koenig
Research Assistant, CCED

LinkedIn
https://www.linkedin.com/in/sonya-koenig-143665250/

Email
sonyakoenig826@gmail.com

Hello,

As many of you know, I recently concluded my time as a Research Assistant at the Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). As I move forward into new opportunities, I want to express my deepest gratitude for making my time at CCED such a rewarding and transformative experience. My journey into this work began during the summer of 2024, where I served as a Planning and Advocacy Intern at Communities First, Inc. in Flint, Michigan. There, I uncovered the troubling disconnect between the built environment, sustainability and social justice. Across the city, thousands of blighted structures were being demolished with taxpayer funds, their materials sent straight to landfills. Frustrated with this reality, I started to research more sustainable alternatives. This is where I discovered Dr. Rex LaMore and his revolutionary field of Domicology.

Before long, I joined the Circular Economy and Community Benefits teams at the CCED, not realizing then just how profoundly this work would shape my professional and personal endeavors. From organizing events to advancing circular economy and community benefits, to conducting surveys and engaging with partners across the country and supporting legislation to raise Michigan's tipping fee to establish a Circular Economy Institute at MSU, then writing reports and championing student-led advocacy, plus so much more, this experience has broadened my skills and network while strengthening my commitment to building a more equitable and sustainable future.

As far as the future holds, I will be graduating from MSU this December with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Relations and Policy. I plan to attend graduate school in urban and regional planning in the fall of 2026 to continue this important work in municipal operations. Thank you again to everyone for your mentorship, collaboration, and shared commitment to this important work. I am deeply grateful for the experiences and relationships that will continue to inspire me moving forward. As always, please keep in touch! You can connect with me on LinkedIn and email me at sonyakoenig826@gmail.com, I look forward to crossing paths with you all in the future!

MEET THE CCED 25/26 HUMPHREY FELLOWS!

From supporting businesses in the private sector to leading outreach initiatives that connect institutions with entrepreneurs and local businesses, Desarta Rapushaj's career reflects her deep commitment to inclusive and sustainable development. She is a 2025–2026 Humphrey Fellow from Albania, currently hosted at Michigan State University and working with her faculty advisor, Mary ZumBrunnen, Assistant Director at the Center for Community and Economic Development. Desarta was born and raised in Albania, a small country in Southeastern Europe and part of the Western Balkans region. With its Adriatic and Ionian coastlines, rich cultural heritage, and dynamic path toward European Union integration, Albania has been both her home and her inspiration. Growing up in this context shaped her perspective on resilience, progress, and the importance of building strong bridges between people, communities, and institutions.

Desarta Rapushaj
2025–2026
Humphrey Fellow

Her academic background combines finance and governance. She first earned a master's degree in finance, which gave her a solid foundation in business and economic analysis, and later completed a second master's in European Policies and Governance, focusing on EU integration,

public administration, and regional development. This academic path provided her with both technical knowledge and policy insight, preparing her to connect institutions with businesses and communities in practical and meaningful ways. With over 11 years of professional experience across both the private and public sectors, her journey began in the banking industry, where she worked as a credit analyst supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

There, she saw how access to finance could empower entrepreneurs to expand their businesses, create jobs, and bring stability to families. Motivated to broaden this mission beyond finance, she later transitioned into Business Supporting Organizations such as the Albanian Investment Development Agency and the Agriculture and Rural Development Agency. In these roles, she contributed to programs that enhance SME competitiveness, support businesses in reaching new markets, and opened opportunities through national and EU-funded initiatives.

One of the most meaningful aspects of her work has been leading outreach initiatives across Albania, where she connected directly with entrepreneurs, businesses, and communities. These moments of dialogue and exchange inspired collaboration, built trust, and turned development programs into real opportunities that people could believe in. They also reinforced her conviction that lasting change happens when institutions engage openly and work side-by-side with the people they serve.

The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship has provided Desarta with an opportunity to expand this mission globally. At Michigan State University, she is focusing on economic development, SME competitiveness, and sustainable finance. She is pursuing courses that strengthen her understanding of development and leadership, including Understanding and Assessing the Global Business Environment and Developing Strategic Business Models at the Eli Broad College of Business, as well as Policy Implementation and Administration at the Department of Political Science. These academic engagements allow her to combine economic and business perspectives with policy approaches, building a holistic view of how institutions and markets can work together to drive sustainable development.

The fellowship is also about collaboration across borders. Alongside 11 other Humphrey Fellows at MSU, Desarta is exchanging knowledge and perspectives with professionals from around the world, exploring how diverse contexts can tackle shared challenges. This international exchange underscores her belief that while countries may differ in their circumstances, their aspirations for inclusive and sustainable futures are universal.

Beyond her institutional roles, Desarta has participated in numerous international initiatives. She was part of the Swedish Institute's Young Professionals Program on digital governance and worked as Marketing and Communications Coordinator for the Albania Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. In this global role, she developed and implemented strategies to promote Albania's presence and coordinated business missions that connected Albanian enterprises with global partners. She has also actively engaged in international fairs, forums, and B2B meetings, expanding networks and creating new opportunities for collaboration.

Looking ahead, Desarta hopes to return to Albania equipped with new tools, knowledge, and partnerships to accelerate EU integration, enhance SME competitiveness, and foster sustainable rural development. Her journey as a Humphrey Fellow is not only about professional growth but also about resilience, leadership, and the conviction that meaningful change happens when institutions and communities work together toward a shared vision of progress.

For more information about Desarta Rapushaj's work, connect with her on LinkedIn or email at drapushaj90@gmail.com.

Meher Bejaoui

2025–2026 Humphrey   Fellow

My journey to the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship at Michigan State University has not been a linear path, but a convergence of diverse disciplines, from natural sciences and engineering to international development and public administration. Today, as a Humphrey Fellow, I find myself dedicated to enhancing public management and governance to drive sustainable economic transformation in Tunisia, learning from various experiences in Michigan and mentor, Mary ZumBrunnen. Currently, I serve as an Assistant Director at the Presidency of the Government of Tunisia. In this capacity, I handle the complex human resources and labor relations aspects of State-Owned Enterprises, ensuring they remain compliant, efficient, and socially impactful.

Also, I analyze draft budgets and annual performance reports to ensure sustainability in public financial management. My daily work involves navigating balance between strict compliance and operational efficiency. It is a role that requires administrative oversight and an understanding of how large-scale organizations function within a broader economic ecosystem.

Why the Humphrey Fellowship? What inspired me to apply for the Humphrey Fellowship was a desire to transcend the technical day-to-day operations of public administration and master the strategic leadership required to effect real world change. My background is multidisciplinary by design. I hold a master's degree in engineering from the National Engineering School of Sfax and a bachelor's in biology and geology. This scientific training gave me a foundation in systems thinking and precision. However, as I transitioned into public service, I realized that solving complex multistakeholder challenges requires more than technical solutions. This led me to pursue a master's in international studies at Korea University in Seoul.

Yet, I recognized that to truly optimize the economic and social impacts of Tunisia's SOEs, I

needed to refine my negotiation skills and deepen my expertise in analytical decision-making. I saw the Humphrey Fellowship as a platform to engage with US policymakers, academic professors and scholars and thought leaders. I wanted to understand how different complex governance models balance efficiency with levels of accountability, and how those models could be adapted to other contexts.

Since arriving at Michigan State University, my focus has been on the intricacies of governance models and organizational management. My work is centered on leadership development, capacity building, sustainable economies and technical expertise in public finance. When I return to Tunisia, my goal is to position myself as a catalyst for inclusive economic transformation. The insights I am gathering at MSU and Michigan are directly applicable to my role at the Presidency of the Government.

Specifically, I intend to implement new organizational and HR improvements that prioritize sustainability and efficiency within our SOEs. My aim is to move beyond standard compliance audits and toward a model of performance governance, where enterprises are financially viable and drivers of social and economic development. I plan to use the negotiation and leadership skills honed during this Fellowship to foster better labor relations and promote sustainable environments. By bridging the gap between administrative compliance and strategic vision, I hope to contribute to a public sector that is more agile, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the citizens and different stakeholders.

The Humphrey Fellowship is more than a professional development program, where it is an opportunity to step back from the daily demands of the office to look at the big picture. It is refining my ability to turn complex policy challenges into actionable projects. I am eager to keep learning and improving personally and professionally.

Lansing Eastside Thinkers & Doers
Food Is Power!

Learn about local <u>food systems, security, and assistance</u> in our neighborhoods

The biannual "Thinkers and Doers" event brings together key stakeholders and community members from the MSU and Eastside Lansing communities. <u>The event is free for attendees. Light refreshments are provided</u>.

<u>Where:</u>
MSU Center for Community &
Economic Development
<u>1615 E. Michigan Avenue Lansing, MI 48912</u>

<u>When:</u>
December 8, 2025
4:00-5:00 P. M.

Online Attendees scan **QR** Code or use link:
https://msu.zoom.us/j/94074139408
Meeting ID: 94074139408|Passcode: 522153

Scan QR Code:

Panel Speaker

Dr. Katherine Alaimo

Associate Professor, Director of Sustainability Agriculture and Food Systems Minor Specialization

Nutritional epidemiologist & community-based participatory researcher with interests in food justice, community food security, urban agriculture & gardening, policy & environmental supports for promoting pro-environmental behaviors, healthy eating & physical activity, & school nutrition & health.

Panel Speaker

Jerry Norris

CEO & Founder of The Fledge Located in Lansing, MI
A radically inclusive ideation & maker space, incubator & accelerator located in Lansing, MI. He also serves as the Chairman for the GAIA Solutions & the Fledge Music Group. He spent 5 years as a "Gatekeeper" for the Business Acceleration Fund working with the Lansing Economic Area Partnership (LEAP) & has a deep understanding of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the community at large.

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT