



LEO Labor and Economic Opportunity

Bureaus & Agencies

Boards, Commissions & Councils

LEO Initiatives

About

News from LEO Agencies

New Leading Rural Michigan program strengthens local leaders statewide

December 11, 2025

LANSING, Mich. — The Michigan Department of Labor and Opportunity (LEO) Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) launched their inaugural [Leading Rural Michigan program](#) in partnership with Michigan State University Extension, bringing together emerging rural leaders for a 12-month program to increase engagement, collaboration, recruitment and retention rates in leadership positions in rural communities. The program's unique approach combines leadership and civic education and focuses on network-building among rural leaders at the state level.

"Investing in rural communities and empowering emerging leaders strengthens Michigan as a whole," said **LEO Director Susan Corbin**. "Giving people the tools, training and support to lead helps their communities thrive — and together, we build a more resilient, connected and prosperous Michigan for everyone."

The inaugural cohort includes 31 individuals identified as emerging leaders by established leaders in their respective communities. ORP worked along with MSU Extension and partners cross the state to identify emerging leaders and individuals were selected based on professional or volunteer roles in rural communities. Leading Rural Michigan participants will meet monthly in an online format and will join together for several in person events over the course of the 12-month cohort.

"Rural Michigan depends on strong leadership to take advantage of new opportunities and manage change; and we know that many emerging leaders are positioned to make powerful impacts in their communities. ORP is creating this leadership program in partnership with Michigan State University Extension to prepare people to step into those roles with the confidence, skill and network of resources needed to move their communities forward," said **ORP Director Sarah Lucas**.

Leading Rural Michigan program content focuses on the development of skills necessary to be engaged local leaders:

- **Individual Leadership:** Personality and strengths inventories, time management and effective communication.
- **Partnership and Collaboration:** Conflict management, civility in discourse, facilitation, change management, team building and change management.
- **Rural Leadership/Civic Education:** Working with elected officials and tribal leaders, community and economic development; visioning and planning; municipal funding structures, etc.

"We're excited to welcome such a strong cohort of rural leaders from across Michigan," said **Michigan State University Extension Senior Specialist of Government and Community Vitality Eric Walcott**. "There is great work happening in rural communities, and our goal is to support that progress by helping participants grow the skills and relationships needed to navigate challenges and strengthen their communities."

"This partnership between the Office of Rural Prosperity and Michigan State University Extension brings together high-quality resources and training to support emerging leaders in Michigan's rural communities," said **Director, MSU Extension Center for Local Government Finance and Policy Erika Rosebrook**. "The MSU Extension Center for Local Government Finance and Policy, Government and Community Vitality Team and Great Lakes Leadership Academy are excited to bring our teams together with ORP to provide an innovative, customized training program so that participants leave the program knowing how to maximize their individual talents, bring people together, and get things done for their communities."

2025-2026 cohort and their represented communities

Media Contact:

Chelsea Wuth

WuthC@michigan.gov

- Sam Bailey, Harbor Springs
- Nia Becker, Traverse City
- Kathleen Blust, Indian River
- Virginia Bolshakova, Delton
- Jacqueline Borozan, Frankfort
- Duska Brumm, Nashville
- Laken Chapin, Owendale
- Dave Faber, Sandusky
- Travis Garvey, Hesperia
- Megan Haselden, Calumet
- Zach Hautala, Crystal Falls
- Billi Jo Head, Harbor Springs
- Lauren Hunt-VanderPloeg, Martin
- Kassi Huotari, Ironwood
- Braedan Johnigan, Cadillac
- Kristi Lucas-Zimmerman, Ludington
- Brian Meissen, New Haven
- Mallory Meston, Norton Shores
- Penny Payea, West Branch
- Anson Pavlov, St. Clair
- Alisha Proctor, Deford
- Nikki Radke, Sault Ste. Marie
- Kelly Shreve, Millington
- Kathy Thomas, Cedarville
- Sean Tichenor, Suttons Bay
- Danielle Timmer, McBain
- Zachary Vega, Kalkaska
- Allison Watkins, Newberry
- Erine Wescoat, Manton
- Patricia West, Gladstone
- Amanda Wichinski, Roscommon
- Leandra Wolschleger, Harbor Beach

The program development and delivery are made possible by a \$154,000 ORP prosperity grant to Michigan State Extension, and participants pay a \$250 fee.

For more information on the Office of Rural Prosperity, visit Michigan.gov/ORP.

[Visit our webpage for more information](#) on Leading Rural Michigan.

Labor and Economic Opportunity

MI Newswire

Labor and Economic Opportunity

Rural Prosperity

Related News

Driving Michigan forward: Gov. Whitmer announces new economic transition strategy unveiled at the Detroit Auto Show

UIA offices close for MLK holiday; online resources will be available

2025 unemployment benefits tax statements now available online