

## 2025 Call for Innovation Fellows

### Background

Since 2011, the MSU U.S. EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) has supported over 180 innovative economic development projects in Michigan, spurring high-growth entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic innovation. REI partners have achieved remarkable success; with over \$68 million in public and private investments generated by 97 Student-Led, Faculty-Guided projects; over 69 Co-Learning Plans; and 16 Co-Implementation projects (also known as Innovation Fellowships). Partners of REI leverage higher education, businesses, local governments, EDDs, non-profits, economic developers, and others who create, identify, and develop new economic development strategies and practices, and perform technical assistance for communities in Michigan. REI is committed to a process of engagement to create the best and brightest community and economic developers in the world.

Throughout 2024, the REI Network (over 3,000 Michigan economic development practitioners, business leaders and scholars) submitted innovative economic development ideas/topics of interest. Through a competitive process, working with the REI Consultative Panel of experts across the state, the following topical areas were determined to be timely and effective areas to assist bringing critical new knowledge to bear on the challenges we currently face in community and economic development. The topical areas are listed within the “Topic” section of this application.

### Call for Innovation Fellows

Specifically, the REI Innovation Fellowship program was established in 2016 to tackle tough economic development issues that our distressed communities of Michigan face every day by supporting community leaders on the ground. Innovation Fellowships provide support and coordination to turn concepts into actions, and implement new economic development tools, models, policies, and programs. Innovation Fellows, recruited by REI, its partners, Economic Development Districts (EDDS), and past Co-Learning Plan authors, will identify recommendations in past Co-Learning Plans (*as well as generate new ideas*) to serve as current and practical information for local and state economic development practitioners and policymakers as they consider important decisions for Michigan communities and regions.

**These Fellowships should fall within one of four categorial areas, including: 1) resiliency planning, 2) financial resiliency, 3) 21<sup>st</sup> century communications, and 4) circular economies.**

Within a chosen category, applicants must identify one more topics to focus their work on.

## Topical Areas

The REI University Center has identified the following topical areas for possible Co-Implementation (Innovation Fellowship) projects of 2025. They include: **1) Workforce Transition and Economic Adaptation, 2) Fair Share Affordable Housing Linked to State-Supported Economic Development, 3) Encouraging Large Companies and Public Institutions to Procure from Local Businesses, 4) Addressing Agricultural Workforce and Infrastructure Shortages through Innovation Centers, 5) Community Economic Impacts and Feasibility of Developing Renewable Energy Sources, 6) Assessing the Capacity of Economic Development Professionals for Community Benefit Plans and Agreements, 7) Assessing Businesses Concerns in Adopting Community Benefit Plans and Agreements, 8) Other.** Further description of each is shared below.

These topical areas within one of the above-mentioned foci were weighed by the REI Consultative Panel with consideration to these areas' likelihood to create or retain jobs and/or businesses in economically distressed regions of Michigan.

- 1. Workforce Transition and Economic Adaptation:** As the economy evolves, workforce transition support is essential. Training programs should be designed to help individuals shift from traditional jobs to digital-based roles, such as remote work, freelancing, or online business ownership. What effective models/programs exist or need to be created that can provide these needed skills and create opportunities for online revenue-generating businesses. What advocacy and/or training is necessary to engage these learners in this economy? Are there models that are particularly effective in serving rural communities and small towns?
- 2. Fair Share Affordable Housing Linked to State-Supported Economic Development:** A fair share affordable housing policy distributes the responsibility for affordable housing across all municipalities within a region, rather than concentrating it solely in lower-income areas. This type of policy could be tied to state-supported economic development investments, where regions receive funding for infrastructure, business incentives, and workforce development only if they implement fair share housing practices. Are there examples in other states or metropolitan regions in the U.S., where state support for affordable housing/and state supported economic development investments are based on a region adopting a fair share affordable housing policy? If such examples do not currently exist, what might a model program look like, and what would be the potential advantages and disadvantages of adopting this type of housing and economic development policy?

3. **Encouraging Large Companies and Public Institutions to Procure from Local Businesses:** How can large companies and public institutions be motivated to procure goods and services from local businesses? What incentives currently exist to foster these types of agreements, and what mechanisms are in place to support a directory of local suppliers that also offer capacity-building assistance? Understanding these factors could help in assessing the opportunities and challenges associated with strengthening local business participation in larger procurement networks.
4. **Addressing Agricultural Workforce and Infrastructure Shortages through Innovation Centers:** The shortage of agricultural workers and food processing infrastructure presents significant challenges in many communities. What support mechanisms are available for the development of agricultural innovation centers aimed at promoting advanced farming techniques, 21st Century processing facilities, and agribusiness? Do these centers provide training in sustainable practices, emerging technologies, and value-added processing to enhance the capabilities of local agricultural producers in both urban and rural settings?
5. **Community Economic Impacts and Feasibility of Developing Renewable Energy Sources:** What are the community economic impacts of building renewable energy sources, and how can solid data be gathered to share with local stakeholders? Over time, does the community experience measurable growth in terms of job creation, reductions in unemployment, new business attractions, or increases in the local tax base?
6. **Assessing the Capacity of Economic Development Professionals for Community Benefit Plans and Agreements:** Community Benefit Plans and Agreements are emerging as an important component of economic development activities in Michigan that utilize public investments. This co-learning plan should assess the current capacity of economic development professionals across the state to develop and implement effective community benefit plans and agreements and identify needed training and technical assistance to improve their capacity.
7. **Assessing Businesses Concerns in Adopting Community Benefit Plans and Agreements:** Community Benefit Plans and Agreements are emerging as an important component of economic development activities in Michigan that utilize public investments. This co-learning plan should identify the concerns businesses have in communities in adopting community benefit policies.
8. **Other**

## Application Instructions

An Innovation Fellow should be embedded within the community or organization they seek to work with to achieve the project's goals. Innovation Fellows are expected to work with a community and/or an organization for their entire Fellowship, and are considered contractors, with financial support from the REI. REI intends to fund two Innovation Fellows each year for an eight-month period.

### Proposed Innovation Project

Please provide a detailed narrative, not to exceed five pages, that describes the proposed scope of work. It should be double-spaced, have three-quarter-inch margins and 12-point font. It should clearly identify sections containing the following:

1. Cover page, including your name, email address, phone number, affiliation, and project title;
2. Description of population served or researched through the project idea (ALICE, Asset-Limited/Income Constrained Employed);
3. Identified Redevelopment Ready Communities and/or concentration of opportunity zone tracts;
4. Foci area of resiliency planning, financial resiliency, 21<sup>st</sup> century communications or circular economies;
5. Discussion of the significance and implications of the topical area(s) chosen for Michigan communities and regions, specifically those communities in the most distressed regions with high concentrations of ALICE populations;
6. A brief summary of the problem and how your proposed project will address the economic development challenge or opportunity, also utilizing prior Co-Learning Plan or Student-Led, Faculty-Guided project information, if applicable;
7. The purpose in taking on this project, noting any special contributions it may make toward economic development efforts in Michigan. Is the project new to the community you wish to work with or to Michigan? How?;
8. A list of who you plan to work with to implement this project. Have you already made contact with these individuals/organizations (Economic Development Districts)?;
9. A basic timeline of your proposed project, including possible tasks for individuals or teams;
10. Resources (besides financial support), that REI could provide, that you might find useful for your project? Please be specific;
11. The skills, qualifications, and/or connections unique to you to guide this community or organization in this project;
12. A description of and how your project might generate living-wage jobs, public/private investments, or could be transformative in the community;

13. A **Dissemination Plan** listing Who/What/Where/How (social media, video, press release, presentation, etc.) and When (timeline with benchmarks);
14. A **letter of endorsement** from your organization or from the community you intend to work with;
15. One to three paragraphs describing how you fulfill the qualifications listed below.
16. A predicted number and description of jobs that may be created or retained, if applicable;
17. Describe briefly how you plan to make your final report ADA compliant/accessible,
18. Share how diversity, equity and inclusion are considered in your project throughout its duration and beyond August 2025.

### Required Qualifications

- Strong knowledge base in the topic or area of interest and formal training in facilitating or leading successful projects
- Creative problem solver
- An opportunistic mindset
- Energy and passion for the project
- Proactive and prudent
- A high level of social capital
- A long-term vision for the project

### Funding

Up to \$10,000 for an eight-month period.

### Use of AI:

The growing prevalence and use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the production of community and economic development products calls upon us to provide reasonable guidance to our partners and colleagues on how that usage may be ethically employed. These guidelines are an initial set of recommendations that recognize that AI is a fast-evolving technology that may have value in addressing capacity issues for communities in writing and data analysis.

We offer these guidelines as a beginning point in this evolving field and as the practice of AI in community and economic development matures welcome additional insights and suggestions on how we might best employ these tools ethically to advance the equitable use of AI to assist our communities.

We recommend that community and economic development scholars and practitioners:

- Disclose the use of any AI tools in the introduction or methods section of a product to provide for transparency.
- Describe in detail in the appropriate locations through footnotes or other appropriate citation methods which parts of the text/data are affected.
- AI tools may have inherent limitations and biases in their application to specific identity groups. If known, explain these limitations and biases in an appropriate footnote or appendix.
- AI tools may also pose ethical challenges in issues of data security and privacy. Explain how data security and privacy are not compromised in your use of AI.
- No AI tool will be accepted as a credited author on a project. That is because any attribution of authorship carries with it accountability for the work, and AI tools cannot take such responsibility.

### Deliverables

1. Four written updates, provided according to the schedule below. Each update must be 1-2 pages in length, and must indicate major steps taken to accomplish goals, barriers, and successes/outcomes.
2. A Final Report, 15-20 in length. It must describe the major steps taken, lessons learned, and any outcomes or successes achieved (including any measurable, such as jobs, investments, etc.).

Updates and deliverables should be sent according to the schedule below:

- **December 09, 2024** – Application/Proposals Due
- **January, 2025** – Notices of Award sent out by REI
- **March 28, 2025** – First Update Due
- **May 7, 2025** – Second Update Due; Presentation/Update to Consultative Panel
- **June 6, 2025** – Third Update Due
- **July 11, 2025** – Fourth Update Due
- **August 14, 2025** - Present at Innovate Michigan! Summit
- **August 25, 2025** – Final Report Due

### Submission

Applications must be received by **5:00 pm EST on December 09, 2024**.

- *Online submissions* at [reicenter.org](https://reicenter.org) (preferred method)

- *Email submissions* may be submitted as file attachments and sent to [jondyjen@msu.edu](mailto:jondyjen@msu.edu) (you must enter your Innovation Fellow Project Title, the date, and your last name in the subject as: "Innovation Project Title, date, last name." Submissions will be acknowledged by an e-mail message to the lead author named on the application).

### Questions

Please contact Jenan Jondy at [jondyjen@msu.edu](mailto:jondyjen@msu.edu) or 517-353-9555.