

SPRING 2026

# REPORT

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# Legacy Lives Here.

Community  
Foundation

FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN



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Photo Credit: Cover photo courtesy of the Village of Lake Orion

## Vision, Mission & Values

### Vision

Southeast Michigan is a place where everyone thrives.

### Mission

We build the resources, relationships and expertise required to expand equitable access to opportunities. Our mission is to make southeast Michigan a desirable place to live, work and play for all residents, today and tomorrow.

### Values

- Innovation
- Leading Change
- Operational Excellence
- Collaboration
- Trust and Integrity

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## Message from the President & CEO

Interest in regional collaboration is on the rise across southeast Michigan. Even as local communities navigate shifting federal funding, the impacts of geopolitical tensions and conflicts, and the economic impact and opportunities of artificial intelligence, regionalism is gaining traction. Collaboration with public and private partners like you helps to ensure our region is a place where everyone can thrive.

This report will highlight cases in point, including our recent announcement that the Detroit Regional Workforce Partnership (DRWP), founded in 2023 as an initiative of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, has been integrated into the Detroit Regional Partnership. The consolidation positions DRWP to have an even greater impact on advancing economic opportunities throughout the region. DRWP is one of more than 80 initiatives that the Community Foundation has incubated over the past four decades, moving projects from the infancy stage to development, strategy and execution.

We're also pleased to be in partnership with the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation on its Rural Philanthropy Fellows program, a \$2.9 million investment by Wilson spanning Michigan and western New York. Our participation ensures more than \$2.5 million in direct resources for Livingston County, through our affiliate, as well as the rural corridors of northern Macomb and northern Oakland counties. Historically, these areas have lacked philanthropic infrastructure; this initiative will help us build up local leadership that will, over time, change that dynamic.

You'll read how Trustee Stacy Ziarko is contemplating regional collaboration on behalf of the Community Foundation and in her role as president and CEO of Connect Macomb. In a Q&A in this report, she shares her belief that working together across differences is crucial: "Across the rural, suburban and urban communities of Macomb County, several common barriers to thriving consistently emerge. ... Addressing these barriers requires collaborative leadership and sustained investment."

During 2025, the Community Foundation focused on strengthening two core dimensions of our work — data-gathering, and engaging with public and private partners. This effort helped us to bring to light a number of trends related to our five focus areas of Economic Opportunity, Health Equity, Youth and Education, Arts and Culture, and Public Space and Environment. This year, we plan to build on these insights by funding research that will help us better understand important operational nuances of the nonprofit ecosystem in our region.

A healthy nonprofit sector is vital to sustaining thriving communities — something no one understood better than Community Foundation donors Raymond "Bud" and Suzanne Baber. In our feature story, we'll kick off a four-part series that shows how the Babers' philanthropy began with small grants from their donor-advised fund to support nonprofits in Lake Orion and Oxford, and ended with the largest estate gift in our history, benefiting organizations throughout the region in perpetuity. We hope their story will inspire you to think about how you can partner with our team to create your own legacy.

One thing that remains consistent is the Community Foundation's commitment to creating a southeast Michigan where everyone can thrive. We know that collaborating with generous partners, like you and others featured in this report, is the only way to achieve that vision. We're grateful for your continued support.

Yours for the region,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole Sherard-Freeman".

Nicole Sherard-Freeman  
President and CEO  
Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan



## Detroit Regional Workforce Partnership joins forces with Detroit Regional Partnership to strengthen talent ecosystem

The [Detroit Regional Workforce Partnership](#) (DRWP), founded as an initiative of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, has moved its home base to the [Detroit Regional Partnership](#) (DRP). The consolidation positions DRWP to make an even greater impact on advancing economic opportunity in southeast Michigan.

The DRP and DRWP were established in 2019 and 2023, respectively, by the Detroit Regional CEO Group to better align economic development solutions for the business community, as well as support economic growth in the region.

Community Foundation President and CEO Nicole Sherard-Freeman worked with members of the Detroit Regional CEO Group to establish DRWP when she joined the Community Foundation in 2023. The Community Foundation served not only as a funder and thought partner for DRWP, but also as an incubator, providing the resources and governing structure to help get the work off to a strong start.

“When Dave Meador, Gerry Anderson, Dave Egner and I began conversations about launching DRWP, our long-term

vision was to incubate and grow this initiative to ensure the work would be well-positioned to ultimately be housed within an economic development agency,” Sherard-Freeman says. “Southeast Michigan is fortunate to have a group of seasoned leaders who believe in the multiplier effect of connecting workforce development and economic development systems.”

The Community Foundation has incubated more than 80 initiatives over the past four decades, moving projects from their infancy to development, strategy and execution.

Since its launch two years ago, DRWP has worked to simplify how employers engage with the workforce system — aligning education, training and support services with real-time labor market demands. DRWP developed several research-to-action assets including the Breaking Down Barriers to Employment series and the Jobs that Mobilize report. Both can be viewed in the [2025 DRWP impact report](#).

Economic opportunity is a pillar of both the Community Foundation’s work and the Detroit Regional Partnership.

“We are thrilled to welcome the former DRWP team members into the Detroit Regional Partnership family,” says Maureen Krauss, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Partnership. “We are now a singular, unified team, focused on enabling our region’s employers to attract and retain the skilled workforce they need, while providing individuals, families and communities access to great career opportunities.”

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## Collaboration is key to building a stronger, healthier region

The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan is committed to being a thought leader around our five focus areas of Economic Opportunity, Health Equity, Youth and Education, Arts and Culture, and Public Space and Environment.

We believe that no single system, including philanthropy, can solve the challenges or activate the opportunities these focus areas present. Instead, we must work together with government, the private sector and community partners to make progress toward our shared vision of a thriving southeast Michigan.

To that end, the Community Foundation seeks to shine a light on the issues and share ideas about how we can jointly expand equitable access to opportunities throughout southeast Michigan. This was the goal of a set of engagement efforts we hosted in 2025 called the “CFSEM Conversation Series.”

“Examining the Economics of Healthcare,” which closed out the series, focused on Health Equity. It featured Bob Riney, president and CEO of Henry Ford Health System; John D. Lewis, retired chairman of Beaumont Health and a current Community Foundation trustee; and Nicole Sherard-Freeman, president and CEO of the Community Foundation.



The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan recently hosted a conversation called “Examining the Economics of Healthcare,” focused on Health Equity. It featured Bob Riney, president and CEO of Henry Ford Health System, left; Nicole Sherard-Freeman, president and CEO of the Community Foundation; and John D. Lewis, retired chairman of Beaumont Health and a current Community Foundation trustee.

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As federal funding and policies have reshaped the healthcare landscape, this special event explored the complex economics of healthcare; the future of equitable access; and how public, private and philanthropic partnerships can build a stronger, healthier region for all.

The event also offered a glimpse into what it’s like to have the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan as a philanthropic partner on the focus areas that matter most to you.

## The Great Lakes Way receives Pure Michigan Trail designation



Sarah Wedepohl, vice president of Community Impact at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, and Great Lakes Way advisor John Hartig, accept the Pure Michigan Trail award.

The Great Lakes Way, an initiative of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, was among three paths in 2026 that received a Pure Michigan Trail designation, an annual recognition highlighting the state’s top trails.

The Great Lakes Way is a set of 160 miles of greenways and 156 miles of blueways that connects communities stretching from southern Lake Huron through western Lake Erie. The trail, which was developed in collaboration with dedicated community partners, reflects the Community Foundation’s commitment to investing in parks, trails and climate-smart infrastructure that improve environmental health and quality of life in southeast Michigan.



## ‘Legacy Lives Here’: Lake Orion couple entrusts Community Foundation with philanthropic dreams

The Suzanne L. and Raymond Baber Jr. Fund represents one of the most complete philanthropic journeys in the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan’s history — a 22-year arc that began with a modest donor-advised fund and ended with the largest estate gift the Community Foundation has ever received.

The Babers were people who cared deeply about their community. Suzanne Baber was a teacher and counselor in Waterford Township. Raymond “Bud” Baber, Jr. was a veteran and an advertising executive with Campbell-Ewald. The couple volunteered regularly at St. Joseph Mercy Oakland hospital, attended the United Methodist Church of Lake Orion and supported local nonprofits. They were married for 48 years. Together, they built a life of meaning in their hometown of Lake Orion, nearby Oxford and northern Oakland County.

In 1997, the Babers established a donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation to ensure they could support the causes they cared about throughout their lifetimes and far into the future. A donor-advised fund provides support for charitable causes by an individual, family, business or foundation, and gives them the ability to make grant recommendations.

The Babers’ early grants from their donor-advised fund were modest and made to well-known organizations: \$250 to the Old Newsboys’ Goodfellow Fund of Detroit, \$500 to the Detroit Zoological Society, \$500 to Oxford Community Schools. The fund was a flexible, accessible starting point for



Longtime Lake Orion residents Suzanne and Raymond “Bud” Baber partnered with the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan to support the causes they cared about during their lifetimes. The fund they established continues to benefit nonprofits in their community and throughout southeast Michigan.

a lifetime of strategic giving and the Community Foundation was a philanthropic partner from day one, providing resources, relationships and expertise.

“Bud and Suzanne’s story is a relatable one for people who are interested in giving to charity, but want some support along the way,” says Randy Ross, vice president of Donor Services at the Community Foundation. “We met them where they were and built trust with them over many years as their giving journey evolved. Along the way, they interacted with

many Community Foundation staff. They weren't seeking praise or recognition. Instead, they were kind, thoughtful and humble people who wanted to support the causes they cared about in southeast Michigan."

As the Babers' capacity for giving grew over time, they wanted to share their good fortune with the community in new ways. The Community Foundation team worked with them to evolve their charitable strategy, incorporating a greenways field of interest fund, a charitable gift annuity and, ultimately, a nearly \$15 million endowment that continues to benefit organizations in northern Oakland County and throughout southeast Michigan.


The Babers' story is not one of a couple born to vast wealth. It's a story about starting where you are with what you have. That's where legacy can begin — not with a grand gesture, but with a first step.

## Work With Us

Are you interested in starting a donor-advised fund? Let's talk about your giving goals and how we can help you achieve them. From donor-advised funds to planned gifts, we're here to help you fulfill your philanthropic goals in your way. Join us in investing in southeast Michigan's future.

**Contact our Donor Services team today.**

 [DonorServices@cfsem.org](mailto:DonorServices@cfsem.org)

 313-961-6675

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## Legacy Lives Here: Next up in the series

This year-long series tells the story of Suzanne and Raymond "Bud" Baber's giving journey across four installments. It highlights how the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan built trust with the couple over decades, in partnership with their professional advisors. A charitable strategy that began with modest gifts from the Babers' donor-advised fund evolved into a greenways field of interest fund and, eventually, a generous planned gift that continues to benefit organizations in northern Oakland County and throughout southeast Michigan.

### #1 Meet the Babers:

Longtime Lake Orion residents Suzanne and Raymond "Bud" Baber establish a modest donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation in 1997 to support causes they care about in their hometown and beyond.

### #2 Community Impact:

The results of the Babers' generosity include an accessible gazebo in Brandon Township, instruments in the hands of budding young musicians in Pontiac and a leafy green trail in northern Oakland County. The couple's generosity improves lives and strengthens communities.

### #3 Relationships Matter:

Handwritten notes, deep community ties and a personalized giving strategy reflect the Babers' close collaboration with their professional advisors and the Community Foundation team over the years.

### #4 A Final Gift:

Suzanne meets at a local coffee shop with her Community Foundation partner to define the legacy she wants to leave behind on behalf of herself and her husband, Bud — a generous gift that continues to benefit southeast Michigan today.

# Q&A



## Thriving communities take teamwork, says Trustee Stacy Ziarko

Trustee Stacy Ziarko embodies the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan's value of collaboration.

As president and CEO of Connect Macomb, a business advocacy and networking organization that serves over 1,100 members countywide, she functions as a community builder and corporate matchmaker. She also was named as one of Crain's 40 under 40, class of 2020, as well as a Crain's Most Notable Women in Nonprofit in 2022.

In 2024, Ziarko joined the Community Foundation's Board of Trustees. She takes pride in serving as a conduit between Macomb County and the Community Foundation and says her superpower as a trustee would be linking people, industries and ideas to move initiatives forward.

**Question:** As president and CEO at Connect Macomb, how do you see your work connecting with the Community Foundation's focus area of Economic Opportunity?

**Answer:** I see our work as deeply aligned with the Community Foundation's focus on Economic Opportunity. At its core, Connect Macomb exists to strengthen the economic vitality of our region by supporting businesses, nonprofits and local leaders — particularly those who create pathways to stable jobs, workforce readiness and inclusive growth. Through convening cross-sector partners, advancing small business development and connecting talent to opportunity, we help ensure that economic growth is not only strong, but broadly shared.

**Question:** What are you working on right now that you're excited about?

**Answer:** We are currently planning Macomb County's Community Impact Day in May 2026. This is a countywide volunteer initiative to bring together businesses, nonprofits, public agencies and community members to create real, lasting impact in our community. This will help Connect Macomb foster a culture where economic growth and community well-being go hand in hand.

**Question:** What are the common barriers to thriving that you observe throughout the rural, suburban and urban communities of Macomb County?

**Answer:** Several common barriers to thriving consistently emerge. While the specific circumstances may differ by geography, many of the underlying challenges are shared.

- **Access to workforce opportunities and skills development** remains a significant barrier. Many employers in Macomb County struggle to find talent with the right technical or soft skills, while residents — particularly those from underserved communities — often lack access to affordable training, credential programs or clear pathways to good-paying careers. Strengthening connections between education, workforce programs and industry is essential to closing this gap.
- **Access to affordable and stable housing** is another growing barrier. Rising housing costs and limited inventory make it difficult for many working families to remain in or move into communities where they can thrive. Housing instability can impact workforce participation, educational outcomes and overall economic mobility.

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**"It is a privilege to represent Macomb County, my hometown, and share with the Community Foundation the many positive things happening in our community. Being able to highlight the innovation, partnerships and progress taking place here makes this work especially meaningful to me."**

■ **Reliable access to broadband and digital connectivity** has also become a critical factor in economic opportunity. In parts of Macomb County, particularly rural or underserved areas, limited high-speed internet access can restrict residents' ability to work remotely, access online education and job training, run small businesses, or connect to essential services like telehealth. Ensuring affordable and reliable broadband is increasingly essential for full participation in today's economy.

■ **Access to capital and support for small businesses** remains another challenge, particularly for minority-owned, women-owned, and early-stage businesses. Entrepreneurs often need stronger networks, mentorship, and financial resources to start and grow businesses that contribute to local economic vitality.

■ **Finally, fragmentation between sectors and resources can limit progress.** Many organizations are working hard to address community needs, but coordination between nonprofits, businesses, education and government can sometimes be inconsistent. Strengthening partnerships and creating shared strategies across sectors is critical to building more equitable and sustainable growth across Macomb County.

Addressing these barriers requires collaborative leadership and sustained investment, but Macomb County also has tremendous assets — engaged businesses, strong nonprofit organizations and committed community leaders — that can help move the region toward greater opportunity and resilience.

**Question:** What motivates you to prioritize philanthropy and community service?

**Answer:** What motivates me to prioritize philanthropy and community service is a deep belief that strong

communities are built when people and organizations invest in one another. I have seen firsthand how collaboration, generosity and shared responsibility can create real opportunities for people to thrive. Supporting philanthropy and community service allows me to help connect resources, ideas and leaders in ways that strengthen the social and economic fabric of our community.

**Question:** What do you love about the Community Foundation?

**Answer:** It begins with the staff at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, whose dedication and expertise make the Community Foundation's impact possible. Their behind-the-scenes efforts are what allow philanthropic investments to translate into meaningful change across our communities.

I have also greatly valued the opportunity to work alongside fellow board members and learn about the important work happening across southeast Michigan. Each member brings a unique perspective and deep commitment to community impact, and those conversations have broadened my understanding of the many ways philanthropy can strengthen our region.

Finally, it is a privilege to represent Macomb County, my hometown, and share with the Community Foundation the many positive things happening in our community. Being able to highlight the innovation, partnerships and progress taking place here makes this work especially meaningful to me.

**Question:** Is there a mantra or quote that inspires you?

**Answer:** "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and I could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'" — Erma Bombeck, humorist

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# Rural philanthropy fellows help Community Foundation develop strategy, capacity

The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan has partnered with the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation on its Rural Philanthropy Fellows program, a \$2.9 million investment by Wilson to strengthen the future of philanthropy and expand the capacity of partner community foundations.

The Community Foundation received funding to hire two fellows for a two-year term (2026–2028). At the same time, peer community foundations across southeast Michigan and western New York are also hosting fellows, creating a shared, cross-regional cohort experience. The program includes support from Wilson for 12 fellows, and from the Michigan-based Herrick Foundation for three additional fellows in the communities it serves, for a total of 15 fellows.

Each fellowship offers a unique opportunity for emerging or established professionals to make meaningful contributions to philanthropy, while gaining hands-on experience within community foundations.

“The expertise and lived experience of our Rural Philanthropy Fellows will be vital as we seek to expand our reach and deepen our impact in the rural communities throughout our seven-county service area,” says Sarah Baltman Wedepohl, vice president of Community Impact at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan.

“The barriers and opportunities that rural communities experience often mirror those in suburban and urban areas, but may require different approaches. We’re grateful that fellows Garit Frye and Joe Newman can help us align our rural philanthropy strategy to best fit these unique needs. Together, with support from the Wilson Foundation, we’re imagining a future for our region when everyone can thrive, regardless of where they live.”

Through the Rural Philanthropy Fellows program, both the fellows and the Community Foundation will deepen their understanding of:

- **The challenges and opportunities facing rural communities.**

- **The gaps and strengths in existing funding resources.**
- **New ways to increase engagement and impact.**

This work may include research projects, the development of background materials or white papers, and other learning efforts that support the Community Foundation’s rural-focused strategies.



## Meet Garit Frye

Frye has joined the Community Foundation as our Data and Learning Fellow.

In this role, he will help us better use data and evidence to inform decision-making, assess impact and clearly communicate our story to stakeholders. He is deeply passionate about using data to improve outcomes and quality of life for low-income households.

A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Frye was born and raised on the Nation’s reservation in Oklahoma. Prior to joining the Community Foundation, he worked for the Cherokee Nation’s Human Services Department, where he helped provide emergency assistance to hundreds of low-income tribal members.



## Meet Joe Newman

Newman has joined the Community Foundation as our Rural Philanthropy Fellow.

In this role, he works to strengthen and expand the Community Foundation’s impact in rural communities throughout northern Oakland, northern Macomb and Livingston counties.

Previously, Newman spent two years working in nonprofit development in Detroit, following nearly a decade of small-scale, organic vegetable farming. While operating his farm in the Upper Peninsula, he became interested in addressing issues faced by his rural community. Participating in township government, organizing fellow farmers and developing a community-funded initiative to address food insecurity all led Newman toward a career in mission-driven, nonprofit work.

# Your Charitable Giving Options

Since 1984, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan has worked to improve the quality of life in our region. We help individuals, families, businesses, and private foundations — along with their professional advisors — to carry out their philanthropic goals.

Each of our standard giving options is designed to make the greatest impact today and tomorrow. They are guided by the interests, intent and vision of our donors. These include:



## Nonprofit Endowment Funds

Support for an organization in perpetuity, ensuring lasting impact and stability



## Community Impact Funds

Support for our response to community needs and opportunities to help everyone in southeast Michigan thrive



## Field of Interest Funds

Support for nonprofits within a specific focus area or geography



## Donor-Advised Funds

Support for charitable causes by an individual, family, business or foundation, with grant recommendations



## Charitable Gift Annuities

Funds are invested to provide a fixed-income stream for life, with the remainder of the gift supporting a named charitable fund



## Supporting Organizations

A separate charitable corporation managed by the Community Foundation that maintains its own identity as a 501(c)(3) public charity



## Endowed Scholarship Funds


Support for students pursuing higher education, helping them achieve their academic goals and build bright futures

Our grantmaking is made possible through all of the funds listed above and other funds that generate lasting resources well beyond our present moment.


## Work With Us

Let's talk about your giving goals and how we can help you achieve them. Contact our Donor Services team today.

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# Community Foundation

FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN



## Legacy Lives Here

Suzanne and Raymond “Bud” Baber were longtime Lake Orion residents who cared deeply about their community and our region. They trusted the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan to ensure their generosity would continue to improve lives and strengthen communities in perpetuity.

When you're ready, we're here to help you fulfill your philanthropic goals in your way. Join us in investing in southeast Michigan's future.

Contact our Donor Services team today.

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