
2025

ANNUAL REPORT



OUR PURPOSE

We bring to light new facts on policy issues important to state government, local governments, schools, metro Milwaukee, and Wisconsin's economy, then disseminate these insights to decision-makers and the general public.

We analyze and publish information about the finances of state and local governments and school districts to increase awareness of fiscal and service-level challenges and promote efficient, effective, and equitable use of taxpayer dollars.

OUR MISSION

We conduct impartial public policy research and analysis to drive informed debate and effective decision-making in the state of Wisconsin.

ABOUT US

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is a statewide nonpartisan, independent policy research organization. We provide informed analysis of critical policy issues affecting local governments, school districts, and the state of Wisconsin. Through research and facilitation activities, we encourage elected officials and community leaders to find effective, data-driven solutions to pressing policy challenges, and promote productive discussion among the public and private sectors.



FROM THE CHAIR

As I begin my second year as Chairman of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, I feel pride in what we accomplished in 2025 -- and excited for where it positions us in 2026 and beyond.

Last year we published 48 reports and interactive data tools, which led to more than 540 stories in state and national media outlets. We gave 45 public presentations to government bodies and other groups. Along with our growing social media presence, this helped disseminate our research to the general public, public officials, and other stakeholders. We also had a successful year in managing our finances and staff transitions.

Our 2025 research highlights included insights into how Milwaukee leaders might improve K-12 educational outcomes, and trends in the value of Wisconsin's exports and imports. Others included post-pandemic trends for the Milwaukee County youth justice system, statewide property taxes for schools and other local governments, and the state's apprenticeship pathways.

We held four in-person and four virtual events in 2025. The highlight was our Salute to Local Government, which enjoyed near-record attendance of more than 450 people.

This was the first full year during which Forum President Jason Stein led our organization, having succeeded former long-time president Rob Henken in 2024. Rob remained with us in a part-time capacity through the close of 2025. We are pained to see him go but thank him for his immense contributions to the Forum and wish him well in the next stage of his career. In recognizing Rob's legacy, the national Governmental Research Association last summer gave him its highest individual honor: the Frederick P. Gruenberg Award for Lifetime Achievement.

We were also grateful last year to receive a special pledge from one of the Forum's key supporters, Jere McGaffey. A former chairman of one of our predecessor organizations, the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, Jere is supporting an annual research project that will seek to identify best practices in other states to solve big challenges in Milwaukee and Wisconsin. The Forum is incredibly grateful to Jere for this gift, which initially will support a study of how to address chronic absenteeism in Milwaukee schools.

As we move forward into 2026, our finances remain strong. Membership contributions for 2025 came close to budgeted amounts and contract research revenues significantly exceeded budget. Our financial stability reflects the generosity of our hundreds of members and supporters, as well as growing demand for our expertise and services.

In the year ahead, I look forward to working with our staff and all of you to help inform state and local decision-making across our state. Thank you for your support of Wisconsin's premier policy think tank!

Sincerely,



Kenneth Munson

Chairman of Wisconsin Policy Forum, CEO of Community Care, Inc.



BY THE NUMBERS

The Forum urges local governments to measure performance and share results, and applies the same principle to itself. Forum staff and the Executive Committee establish performance objectives and use these metrics – and many others – to gauge our impact and effectiveness.



“We are truly grateful for your time and expertise, and we value the Wisconsin Policy Forum’s continued partnership with Leadership Greater Madison. Your contribution added tremendous depth to the day’s exploration of the cradle-to-career education landscape.”

LYNN WOOD

Wood Communications Group

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Milwaukee County Office of
Emergency Management

Bridget Whitaker

Safe & Sound

Robert Whitaker

North Shore Fire Department

Linda Winkler

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RESEARCH

Our research takes on timely issues and helps inform citizens and policymakers through reports ranging from in-depth studies to Focus briefs and interactive data packages.

Our staff focus their attention on government taxes and budgets, workforce and economic development, and education, but we also research social services and nonprofits, criminal justice, housing, transportation and transit, and more. We examine statewide issues as well as those with particular relevance to southeast Wisconsin and Dane County.

Our 2025 reports included insights for improving traditional public, private choice, and charter schools in the city of Milwaukee, as well as analysis of the state budget, data on the condition of Wisconsin bridges, a look at the growth in emergency teacher licenses in the state, and options for preserving a library in South Milwaukee.

We also looked at opportunities to improve the state's apprenticeship pathways, detailed K-12 districts' policies on student cell phone usage during school hours, and explained why statewide school property taxes had risen by the largest percentage in more than three decades.

On the following pages, we highlight some of our most highly publicized in-depth reports in 2025, as well as select Focus briefs and intermediate-length Taxpayer publications.

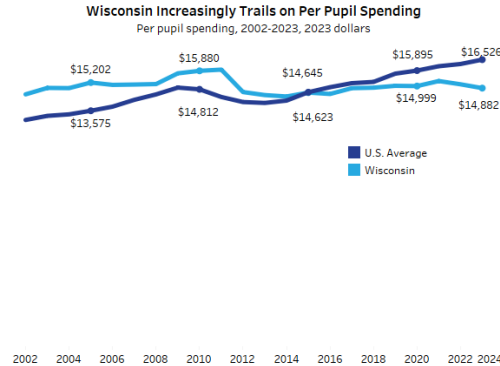


President Jason Stein presenting at our September Policy in a Pub on higher education.

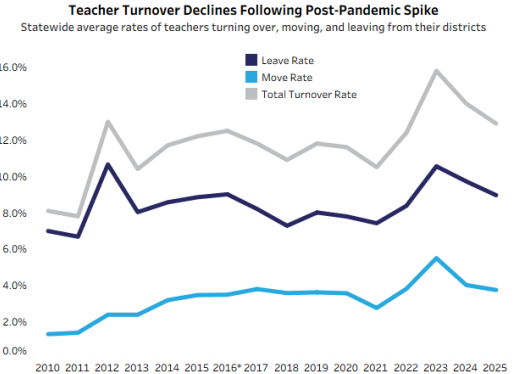
EDUCATION RESEARCH



Wisconsin Education Spending Falls Further Behind National Average



A Partial Turnaround for Turnover



“I love it. It’s clear, it’s simple, it’s written in crayon.
I love it so much.”

JULIE RICHARDSON

Janesville Board of Education Commissioner
(on the Forum’s Janesville School DataTool)

NOT PICTURED

License to Teach

A Jumpstart on College Credit

Adding It All Up

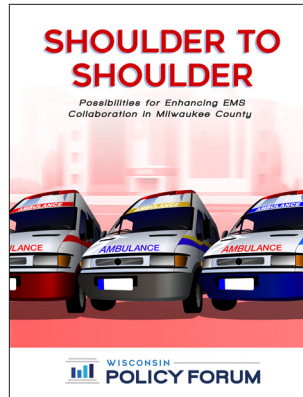
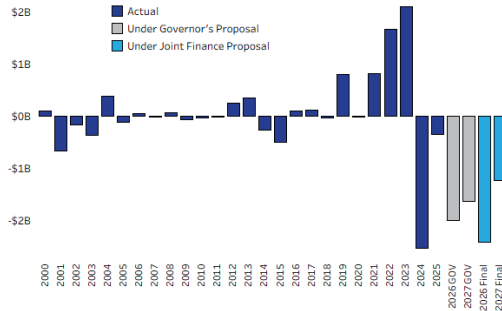
Wisconsin Could Join Call for Change on Cell
Phones in Schools

Student Homelessness at a New High

GOVERNMENT FINANCE RESEARCH

An All of the Above Budget

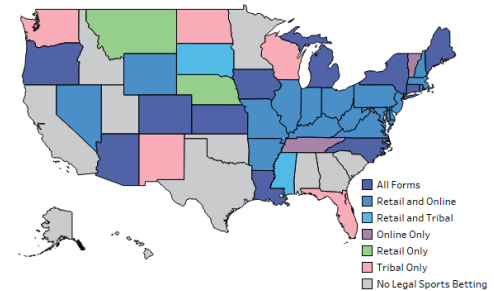
State Costs Would Outstrip Revenue By Largest Amount On Record
General fund revenues minus net appropriations in billions (nominal dollars)



As states approve sports betting, Wisconsin does so on limited scale

Most States Legalize Sports Betting

States' sports betting legalization policies, including type of betting and operators, as of January 2025



NOT PICTURED

Wisconsin's State and Local Tax Burden Fell Again in 2024

Voters Approve Majority of Referenda Even as "Retry" Efforts Increase

Federal Funding Cuts Loom

Changing Communications Landscape Raises Taxing Questions

K-12 Levies Rise Sharply, Counties More Slowly

Wheel Tax Revenues Keep Rolling

Opioid Deaths Drop as Initial Settlement Funds are Distributed

A NEW CHAPTER

Options for Preserving Library Services in South Milwaukee



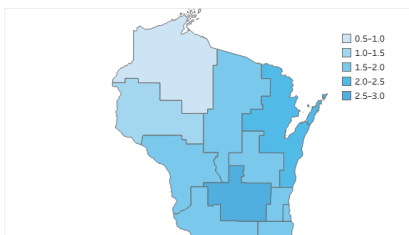
ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Expanding Apprenticeship Pathways

Fewer Apprentices in Some Regions and Occupations

Estimated new apprentices in 2024 per 10 projected annual job openings in selected occupations, by Workforce Development Area

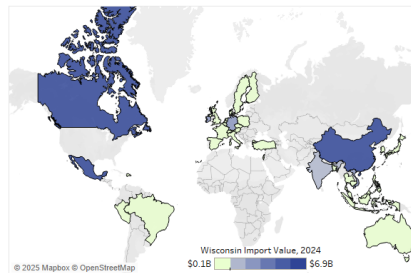
Total (Top 10 Occupations)



Wisconsin's Shifting Import Economy

North America and China Are Biggest Producers of Wisconsin Imports

Top 35 sources for state imports by value, 2024



“I wrote a line in a story long ago that if the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance didn’t exist, we’d have to invent it - and the same thing applies to you guys.”

BILL BARTH

Beloit journalist

NOT PICTURED

Mastering Apprenticeships

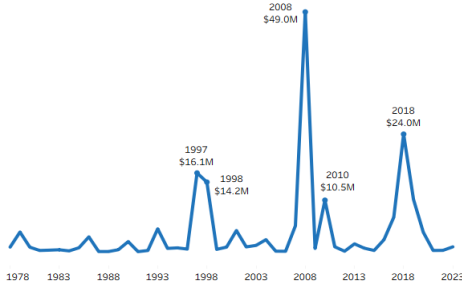
Turbulence for Wisconsin's Export Economy

Wisconsin's net migration soars to levels not seen in decades

OTHER RESEARCH

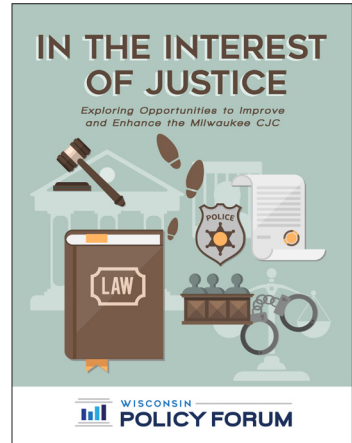
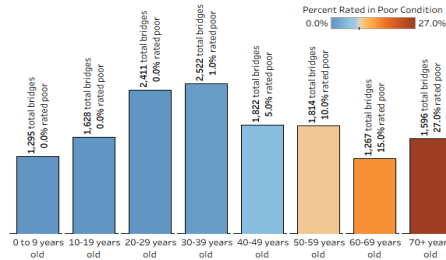
Flood Damage Rises With Rainfall

Damage to Insured Buildings in Wisconsin Repeatedly Spikes
Total damage claimed to Wisconsin structures, 2024 dollars



State Bridges Rate Better than Those on Local Roads

Bridge Condition Ratings Decline Sharply for Structures Over 50 Years Old
Number of bridges in Wisconsin and their conditions by age, 2024

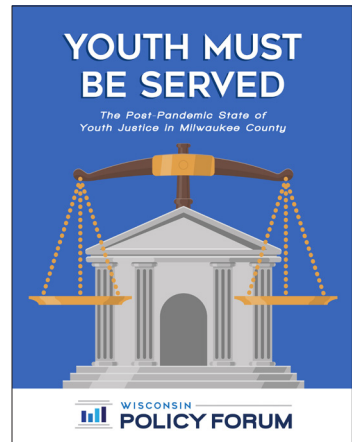


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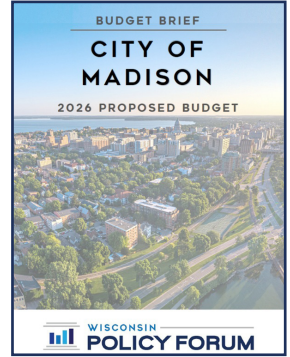
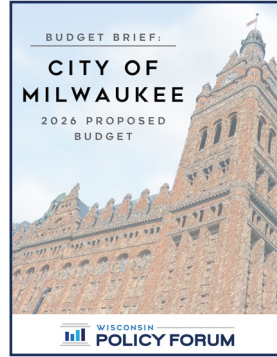
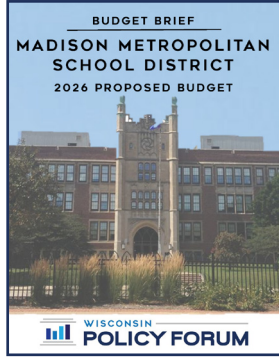
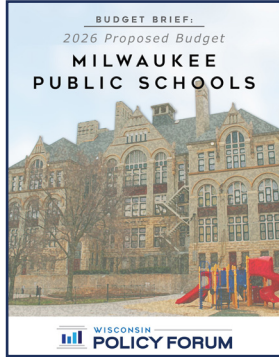
Wisconsin Alcohol Deaths Down from Pandemic, but Remain Elevated

It's Not Always Easy Going "Green" in Local Government

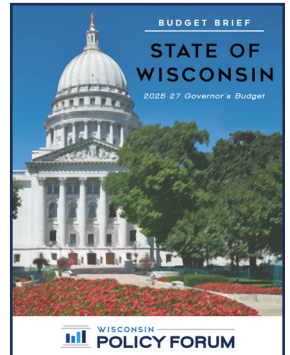
Wisconsin Recycling Changes



BUDGET BRIEFS



Our budget briefs **provide information about the government's basic finances, the specific budget challenges facing the government that year, and how the proposed budget resolves them.** We objectively frame the key issues and decisions that are at the heart of the budget - not only for citizens, but also for policymakers themselves. We add a brief on the Governor's proposed state budget in each odd-numbered year.



DATATOOLS

Our collection of DataTools bolsters the Forum's role as a go-to source for understanding local government and K-12 policy as well as economic issues in Wisconsin.



MUNICIPAL DATATOOL includes data on all 606 cities and villages in the state and allows users to run their own comparative reports.

PROPERTY VALUES & TAXES DATATOOL shows how property values and taxes change from year to year in municipalities and counties across the state.

SCHOOL DATATOOL compiles academic performance and financial data for Wisconsin public school districts and allows users to run their own comparative reports.

METRO MILWAUKEE INNOVATION DATATOOL enables users to gauge the area's performance on indicators tied to innovation and economic growth.



IN THE NEWS

Connecting our work with the broadest possible audience – which we do through the news media and social media – maximizes our impact and furthers our goal of anchoring state and local policy deliberations in impartial facts and data.

In 2025, our research was cited more than 500 times in local, state, and national news outlets, and news media routinely sought out Forum researchers as expert sources. Our social media accounts had just under 9,000 followers combined at the end of 2025.



Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser appeared on *Here & Now*, PBS Wisconsin to discuss our brief on online sports betting in Wisconsin.



Senior Research Associate Tyler Byrnes spoke with CBS 58 Milwaukee about our flood damage Focus brief.

MEDIA COVERAGE

DAILY
REPORTER

MEDIA COVERAGE

BizTimes
MILWAUKEE BUSINESS NEWS

THE 74

abc
NEWS

THE CAP TIMES
Madison, Wisconsin

The
Center
Square

9
abc
WAOW

yahoo!
news

8

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MILWAUKEE · WISCONSIN
JOURNAL SENTINEL
PULITZER PRIZE WINNER 2008 · 2010 · 2011

SUPERIOR
Telegram

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Press Gazette.

58
WDJT · MILWAUKEE

Beloit
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The Stateline's Choice

Wisconsin Rapids Tribune

EdSurge

DoorCounty
DailyNews
.com



WASHINGTON COUNTY
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A Trusted News Source Since 1855

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MILWAUKEE'S npr

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SERVICE
MILWAUKEE

Hudson
Star-Observer

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wifw.com

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wxpr
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91.9 WAUSAU
100.9 IRONWOOD
WXPR.ORG

ANNUAL MEETING

More than 200 people attended our 2025 annual meeting. Our program featured a panel discussion on Wisconsin's economy, headlined by two prominent panelists, Bill McCoshen and Cory Nettles. Both men formerly served as the secretary of the state Department of Commerce (now the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation) under a Republican and Democratic governor, respectively.



FORUM FRIDAY

Our virtual webinar series, Forum Friday, engages public policy leaders on our recently released Forum reports and timely policy issues while enabling participation by Wisconsinites in every part of our state. We hosted four Forum Friday programs in 2025 and will continue the series to augment our in-person events going forward.

State Budget and Federal Funding in the Spotlight

President Jason Stein discussed our research on the state's 2025-27 budget report. Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with two former state budget directors. Our panelists were Michael Heifetz, Managing Director, Public Sector Services, Alvarez & Marsal, and David Schmiedicke, Finance Director, City of Madison.



Trends and Tariffs: Global Trade in Wisconsin

Senior Research Associate Tyler Byrnes discussed our research and recent developments around tariffs and global trade and how they have affected Wisconsin's economy. Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with Aaron Annable, Consul, Consulate General of Canada in Chicago, Jackie Q. Carter, Port Director, Port Milwaukee, and Dale Kooyenga, President & CEO, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.



FORUM FRIDAY

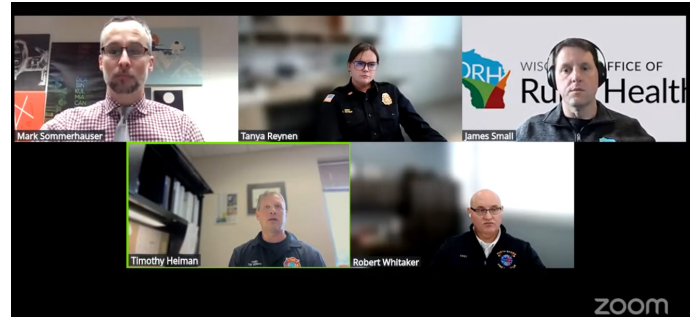
What's Driving Local Property Tax Referenda?

President Jason Stein discussed our research on the use of local property tax referenda to address budget challenges. Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with City of Monona Mayor Nancy Moore, St. Croix County Executive Ken Witt, and City of Stevens Point Mayor Mike Wiza.



Answering the Call: A Look at the Challenges Facing our Fire and EMS Responders

Senior Research Associate Ashley Fisher discussed our research on the challenges facing fire and EMS responders throughout Wisconsin. Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with City of Oshkosh Fire Chief Timothy Heiman, City of Watertown Fire Chief Tanya Reynen, North Shore Fire Department Chief Robert Whitaker, and James Small, Rural EMS Outreach Program Manager, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.



OTHER EVENTS

Milwaukee County's Single Biggest Project



Our April Viewpoint Luncheon focused on Milwaukee County's courthouse complex project. Panelists included David Crowley, Milwaukee County Executive, Carl Ashley, Milwaukee County Chief Judge, Kent Lovern, Milwaukee County District Attorney, Mary Felzkowski, Wisconsin State Senate President, and Bob Donovan, Wisconsin State Representative.

Policy in a Pub



In September, our Policy in a Pub event featured a conversation with the new slate of leaders of Milwaukee's higher education institutions. Our guests were Kimo Ah Yun, President, Marquette University, Eric Baumgartner, Incoming President, Milwaukee School of Engineering, Anthony Cruz, President, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and Thomas Gibson, Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

SALUTE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

More than 460 people from across the state attended the 33rd annual Salute to Local Government on November 19 to join us in celebrating excellence in government and to hear from our keynote speaker, Waukesha County Executive Paul Farrow. Our awards recognized governments and school districts for innovation, partnership, cooperation, and efforts to advance racial equity, as well as individuals in the public sector for excellence and lifetime achievement. Another award category, in partnership with UW-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs, recognized innovative performance in state government.



NORMAN N. GILL AWARD FOR INDIVIDUAL EXCELLENCE

David Schmiedicke

*Finance Director,
City of Madison*



JEAN B. TYLER LEADER OF THE FUTURE AWARD

Jeremy Triblett

*Prevention Coordinator of Community
Access to Recovery Services,
Milwaukee County*



JAMES R. RYAN LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Maureen Murphy

*Village Administrator (retired),
Village of Mount Pleasant*

SALUTE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT



BRIAN SONDERMAN
CEO
MILWAUKEE HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

DAVID G. MEISSNER AWARD FOR PUBLIC - PRIVATE COOPERATION

Homeownership Partnership | *City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Habitat for Humanity*



CAVALIER JOHNSON
MAYOR
CITY OF MILWAUKEE

INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

Camp RISE | *City of Milwaukee and Employ Milwaukee*



DAN HERETH
SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

LA FOLLETTE/GLADFELTER AWARD FOR INNOVATION IN STATE GOVERNMENT

Secretary Dan Hereth, Deputy Secretary Jennifer Garrett, and Assistant Deputy Secretary Niko Ruud | *Department of Safety and Professional Services*



TONY WILLIAMS
SHERIFF
BAYFIELD COUNTY

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION

Two-County Consolidated Emergency Dispatch | *Ashland and Bayfield Counties*

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President



Elizabeth Cizinsky
Director of Business & Community Operations



Mark Sommerhauser
Communications Director & Policy Researcher



Jeffrey Schmidt
Data & Technology Director



Joe Peterangelo
Research Director



Sara Shaw
Deputy Research Director



Ashley Fisher
Senior Research Associate



Tyler Byrnes
Senior Research Associate



Don Cramer
Researcher



Ava Gagner
Researcher



Andy Tisdell
Researcher



Denise Manjarrez-Renteria
Administrative Coordinator

Not pictured:

Rob Henken: *Immediate Past President*

Ari Brown: *Senior Research Associate*

Catoya Roberts: *Director, Milwaukee Community Justice Council*

Erin Perkins: *Project Manager, Milwaukee Community Justice Council*

Erin Hu, Katherine Mastorides, Luis Navarrete, &

Samantha Zingsheim: *Research Interns*

Report design credits: Ragusin Design; Jeff Schmidt

Photo credits: Landre Photography

FELLOWSHIPS

The Wisconsin Policy Forum awards fellowships annually to two graduate students who are studying in Wisconsin to conduct research projects. The fellows work under the guidance of Forum staff and their work is published as Forum research products.



2025-2026
Todd A. Berry Fellow
Rebecca Rose



2025-2026
Norman N. Gill Fellow
Liam Farin



2024-2025
Todd A. Berry Fellow
Rose Melton



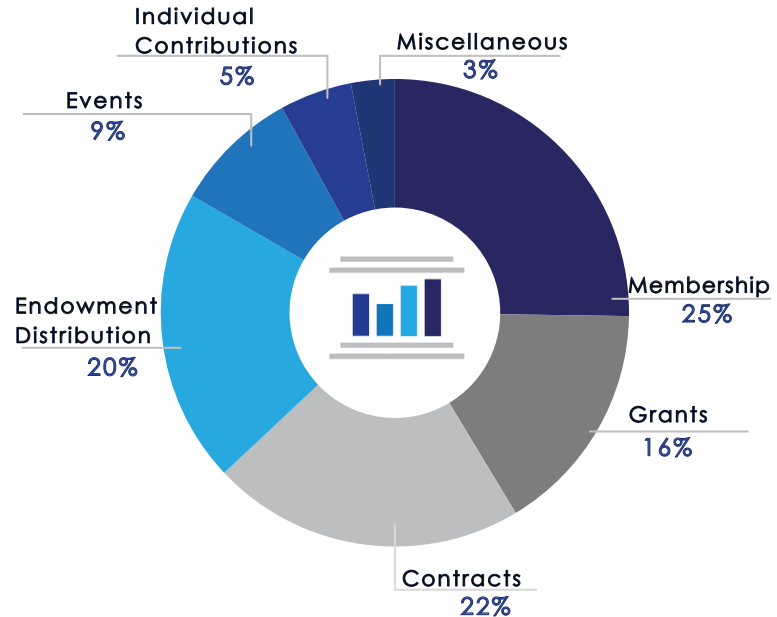
2024-2025
Norman N. Gill Fellow
Vilma Fermin

FINANCES

The Wisconsin Policy Forum had yet another strong year financially in 2025. Membership came in about \$9,000 shy of our ambitious \$400,000 membership goal, largely due to the loss of a single major member late in the year. Our revenue from contracts, events, individual contributions, and sponsorships exceeded our budgeted amounts. Despite economic turbulence such as tariffs and federal funding cuts, the Forum fared well through 2025, which is a testament both to the generosity of our members and our diverse revenue streams.

Our unaudited statements show we ran a \$6,500 operating surplus in 2025, with about \$1.75 million in unaudited operating revenue and just slightly less in unaudited operating expenditures. Once we include our investment earnings of nearly \$568,000 for the year and other accounting adjustments, our overall unaudited financial statements show a \$301,000 surplus for the year.

The budget is overseen by the Forum's Finance and Executive Committees, which receive frequent updates and reports on the organization's finances. Unaudited totals show that, in 2025, 38% of the Forum's operating revenue came from grants and contracts from foundations, governments, and other entities, which support specific research projects or areas of research. One-quarter of our operating revenue last year came from membership dues, which support discretionary research projects and other activities deemed important by the staff and directors. Together these sources of funding and our broad support from around the state sustain our mission and our values of non-partisanship, independence, and fidelity to the facts.



EVENT & REPORT SPONSORS



NETWORK AND LEARN

We communicate our research in many ways, including via presentations to our members. Forum members, civic groups, elected officials, and advocacy groups request Forum staff to speak on our research or related policy issues.

We organize exclusive policy discussions and brown bag lunches for our members, and our researchers are always available to answer policy-related questions.

We connect our members with individuals in government, academia, and elsewhere to obtain policy information and analysis that is critical to their work.

We encourage Forum members to serve on our committees: **Government Finance, Economic Development, Education, Membership & Development, Research, Madison Advisory, and Social Services.** Our policy committees meet a few times each year to review research findings and discuss potential new research topics with Forum staff.



Our 2025 Salute to Local Government had more than 460 people attend.

GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

The Forum is an active member of the Governmental Research Association (GRA), which was founded in 1914 as the national organization of entities engaged in governmental research. Deputy Research Director Sara Shaw serves on the GRA board of directors. President Jason Stein and Research Director Joe Peterangelo also served on the board.

ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS

PILLARS OF PUBLIC POLICY



SENTINELS OF CIVIL CONDUCT



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Associated General Contractors
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Beth Foy & Associates
BMO
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Ernst & Young
Event Essentials

Exact Sciences Corporation
Farmers & Merchants Union
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Husch Blackwell
Husco
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Kapur
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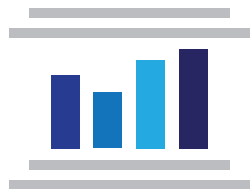
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