

STATE UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL

CARL LEVIN CENTER  
FOR OVERSIGHT AND DEMOCRACY

LEVIN CENTER



FOR OVERSIGHT  
AND DEMOCRACY



WAYNE STATE  
Law School

# Oversight in Action

## Tools and Trends in Legislative Accountability

Jim Townsend & Ben Eikey  
State Oversight Academy  
August 25, 2025



# Agenda

- About the Levin Center
- Legislative oversight basics
- Q&A
- Building an oversight plan

# What is the Levin Center?

- Workshops for Congress, state, local, and international legislatures
- Testimony, webinars, legal analysis, briefs
- Research and reports (50-state analysis, SOA Wiki)
- Conferences, panels, events, civic education
- Oversight experts



Senator  
Carl Levin

Maine Govt.  
Oversight  
Committee



PA House  
Oversight  
Committee

# The State Oversight Academy

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- Building a national community of oversight & accountability leaders
- Serving state legislatures and large municipal councils
- Oversight workshops
- Ongoing technical assistance
- State Legislature Oversight Wiki
- Monthly newsletter

# SOA Oversight Training Program

- Nine lessons on demand – each include video, assignment, and supplemental materials
- LinkedIn micro credential upon completion

I found the training to be very helpful. It gave me great guidance on what my state should be doing more of...specifically, contract monitoring.

Rep. Julie Casimiro  
Rhode Island House of Representatives

The Oversight Training Program is a great resource for anyone in state government who conducts oversight regularly. Whether you are new in your oversight career or an experienced professional, the program offers valuable takeaways and perspective that you can apply to your work.

Matt Thomas  
Senior Analyst,  
Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee

I enjoyed this training experience! The Oversight Training Program is a fabulous introduction to oversight and legislative processes, with helpful resources and relevant exercises.

Erica Jensen  
Performance Auditor,  
Utah Office of the Legislative Auditor General

# What is legislative oversight?

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## The “eyes and voice” of the people

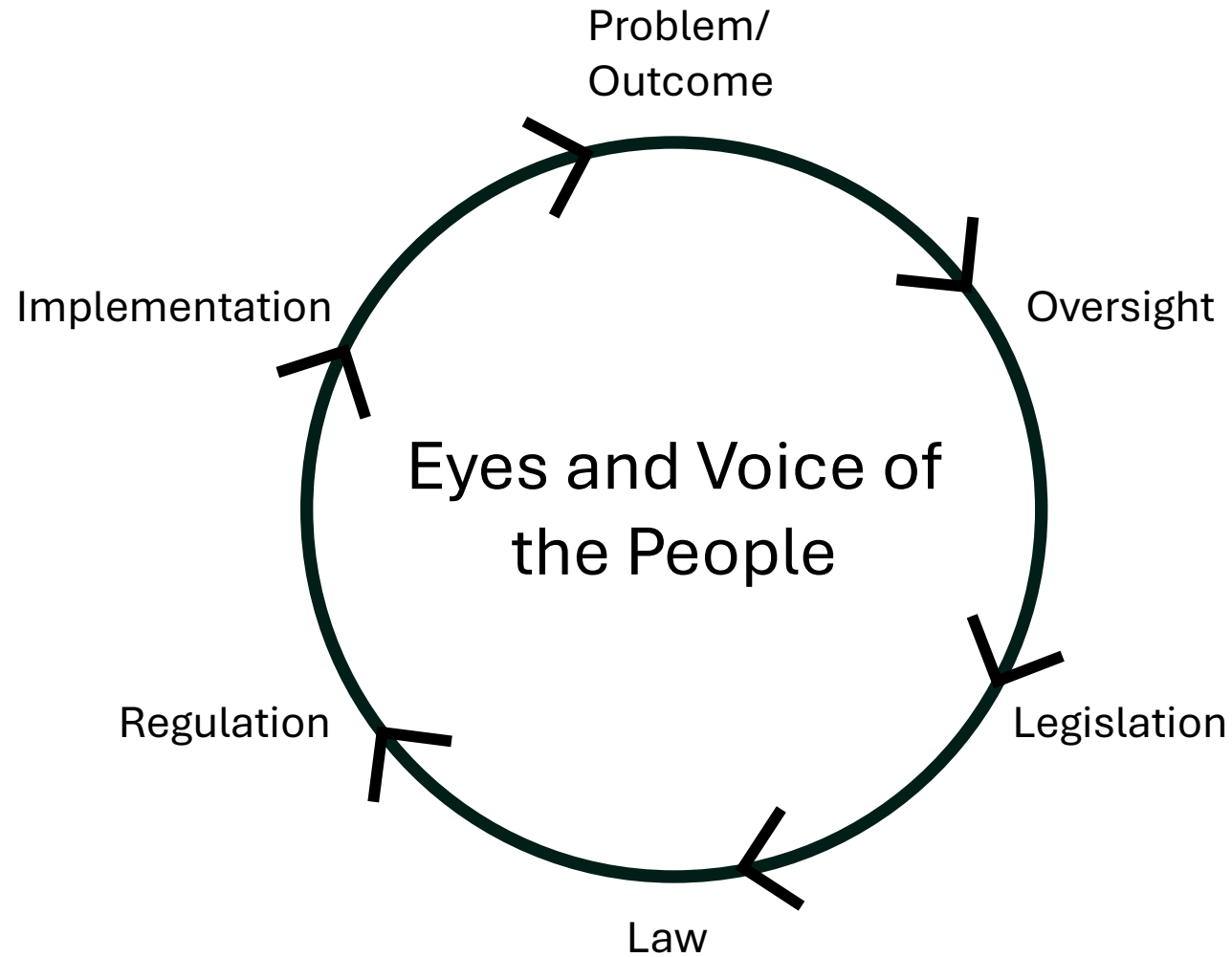
*“It is the proper duty of a representative body to look diligently into every affair of government and to talk much about what it sees. It is meant to be the eyes and the voice, and to embody the wisdom and will of its constituents.”*

–United States Supreme Court<sup>1</sup>

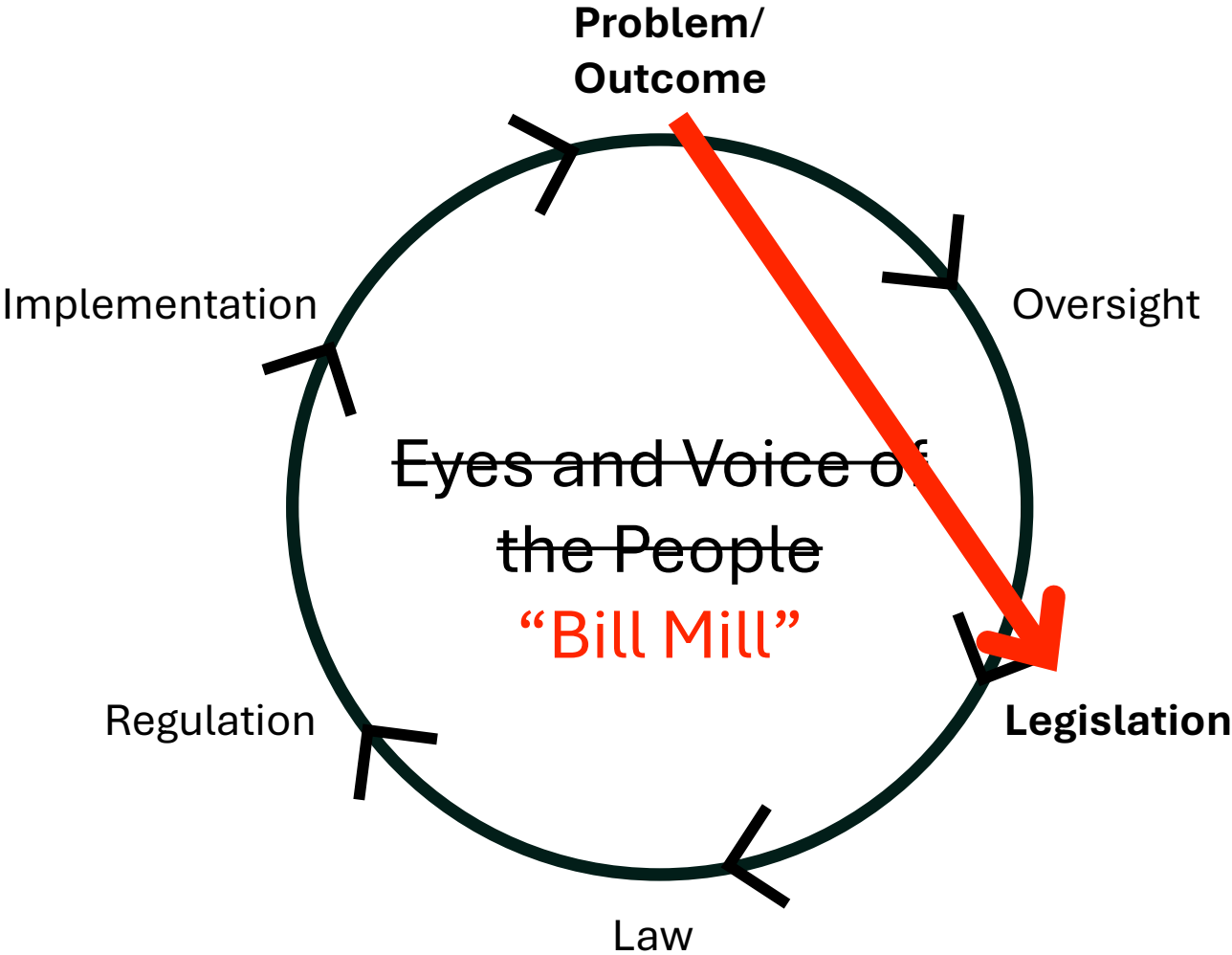
<sup>1</sup> *Trump v. Mazars USA, LLP*, 140 S.Ct. 2019, 2031 (2020), citing *United States v. Rumely*, 345 U. S. 41, 43 (1953).

# Cycle of Accountability

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# Cycle of Accountability



# Routine vs. Event-Driven Oversight



## Routine

Program outcomes

Budgetary

Contracts

Compliance

Deter malfeasance



## Event-Driven

Scandal

Disaster

Chronic problems

Escalating problems

Long-term investigation

# Where do Oversight Topics Come From?

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- Committee jurisdiction
- Reports
- Constituents
- News
- Personal experience
- Oversight plan / long-term vision



# Exercise 1 – Oversight Topics

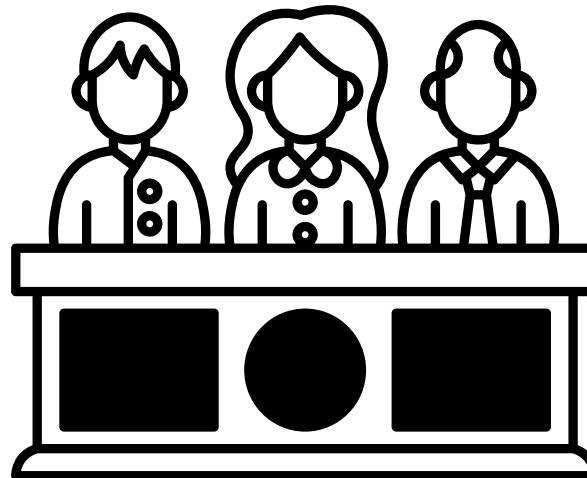
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- Work on your own
- Identify at least three topics that would benefit from oversight
- Good oversight topic = question that, if you could answer, you would make significant progress on that issue

# Avenues for State Legislative Oversight

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- Oversight partners
- Appropriations process
- Committees
- Advice and consent
- Monitoring contracts
- Administrative rule review



# Your Superpowers

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- Legislator phone calls and emails get returned
- Legislators can request investigations and reports
- Legislator questions trigger research, reconsideration, and change
- Oversight can have as much impact as – or more impact than – legislation



# Phases of an Investigation

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1. Fact finding
2. Written product
3. Hearing
4. Follow up



# Factual Questions

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- Not a hypothesis
- Process-oriented
- “How” and “what” questions, not “yes” or “no”

Great!	Less great...
What kinds of oil spills happen in the Great Lakes and how are they handled?	How come don't we have bigger fines for shipping companies responsible for oil spills?
How do outcomes for students receiving special education services vary across the state?	Why are the schools so bad in my district?

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# Our Recommendations

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## Build a culture of oversight

- Staffing should reflect the importance
- Build in bipartisanship
- Follow up

## Improve legislative IT systems

- Collect casework data and use it
  - People-Centered oversight
- Make oversight efforts like committee reports available online

## Work with oversight partners

- Connections with auditors are top predictor of oversight effectiveness
- Minnesota: Annual report on implementation of recommendations

**Questions?**

**Next: Oversight Planning Exercise**

# Oversight Planning Exercise

Topic	Open-ended factual question	Facts and data to pursue	Resources and oversight avenues

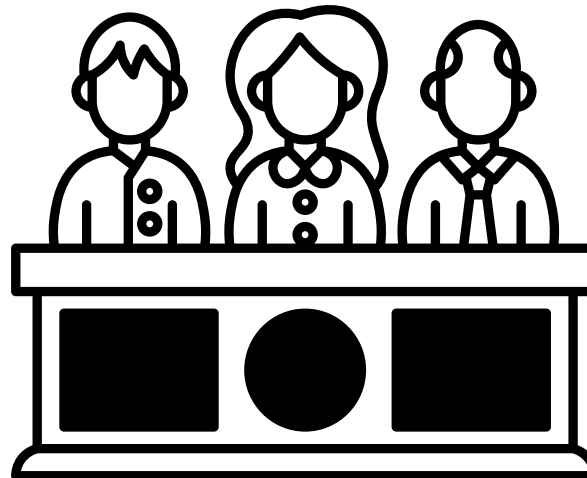
# Oversight Planning Exercise

Topic	Open-ended factual question	Facts and data to pursue	Resources and oversight avenues
<p><i>Condition of the state's roads and bridges</i></p>	<p><i>Why do so many roads and bridges in our state rate as dilapidated or unsafe?</i></p>	<p><i>Road construction methods</i></p> <p><i>Funding policies and formulas</i></p> <p><i>Information on contracts and contractors</i></p> <p><i>Project budgets</i></p>	<p><i>Oversight partners</i></p> <p><i>Appropriations Committees</i></p> <p><i>Admin Rule Review</i></p> <p><i>Advice &amp; Consent</i></p> <p><i>Monitoring contracts</i></p> <p><i>Legislative audits</i></p> <p><i>Construction site visits</i></p> <p><i>Interviews with contractors and engineers</i></p> <p><i>Publicly available contract documents</i></p>

# Avenues for State Legislative Oversight

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# Advancing Oversight. Strengthening Democracy.

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