



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
July 20, 2026



Agenda

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

What is the Levin Center?

Mission

Advance bipartisan, fact-based oversight and civil discourse as essential to representative democracy

Work

1. Technical assistance for Congress & state legislatures, awards, nationwide networking of leaders
2. Research, fellowships, awards, databases, reports, field building
3. Civic Education – testimony, op-eds, events, internships, *Learning by Hearings* high school lessons plans



Senator
Carl Levin

Congressional
Boot Camps



PA House
Oversight
Committee



The State Oversight Academy

- 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

Who Were These People?



What is legislative oversight?

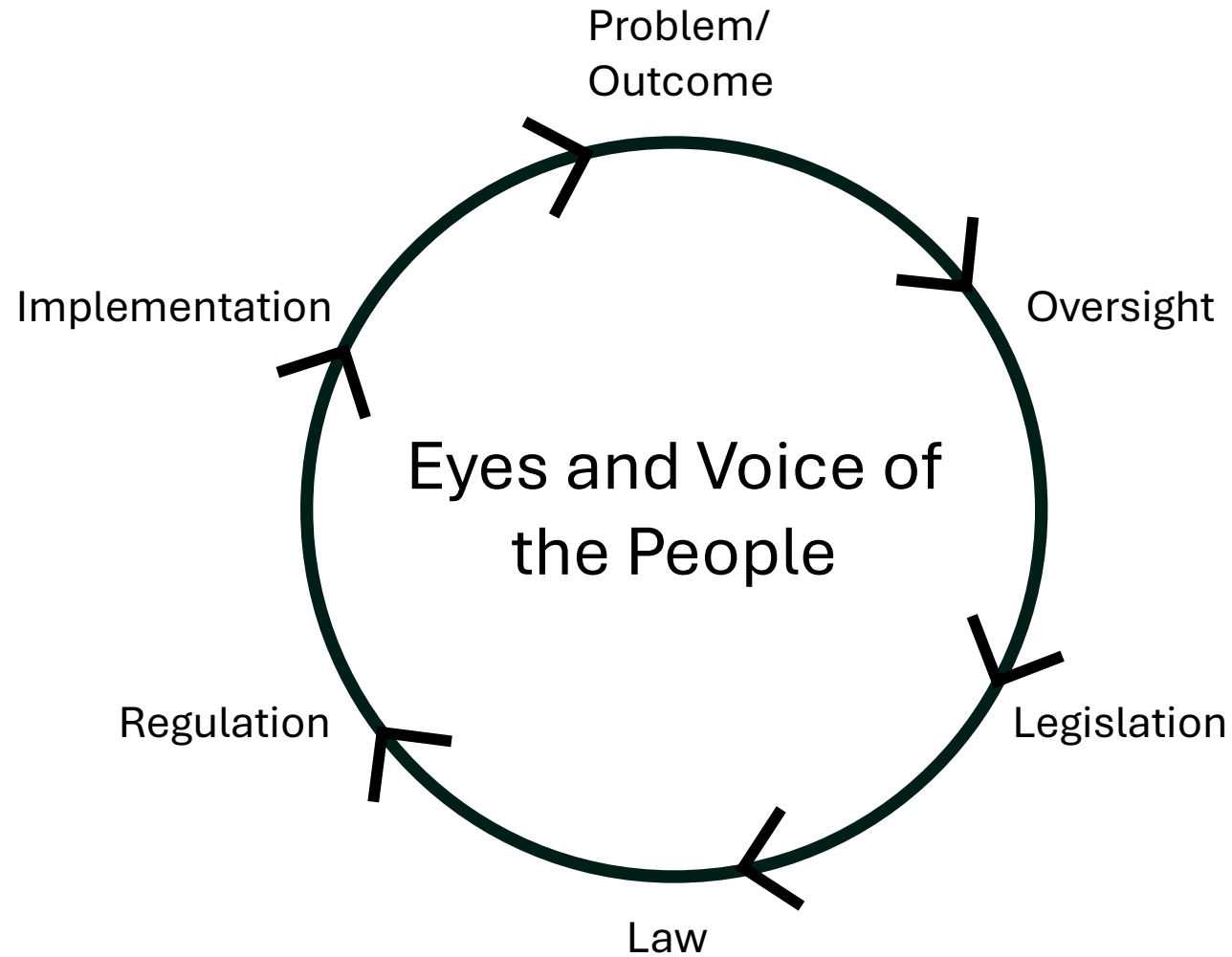
The “eyes and voice” of the people

“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.”

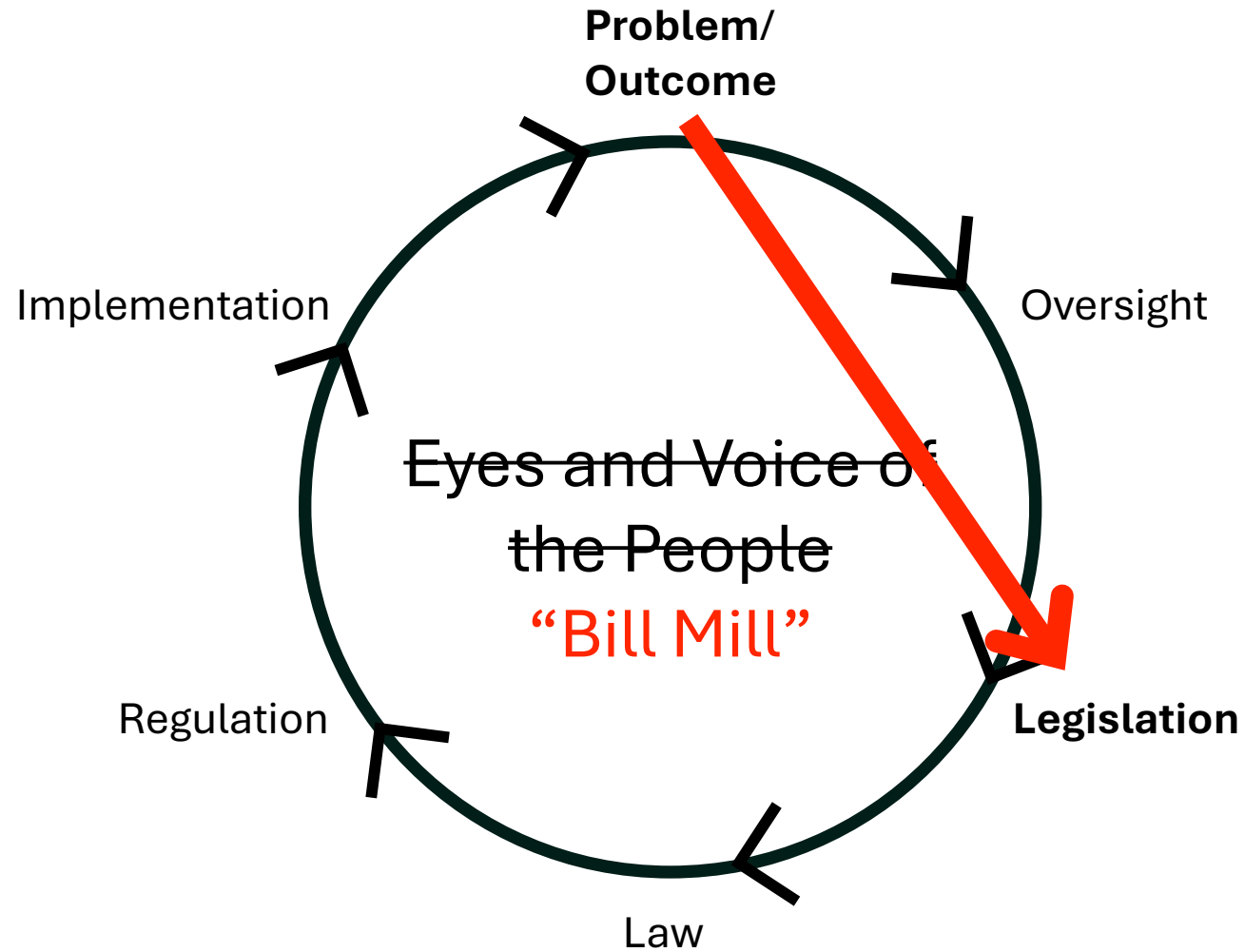
–United States Supreme Court¹

¹ *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



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?

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

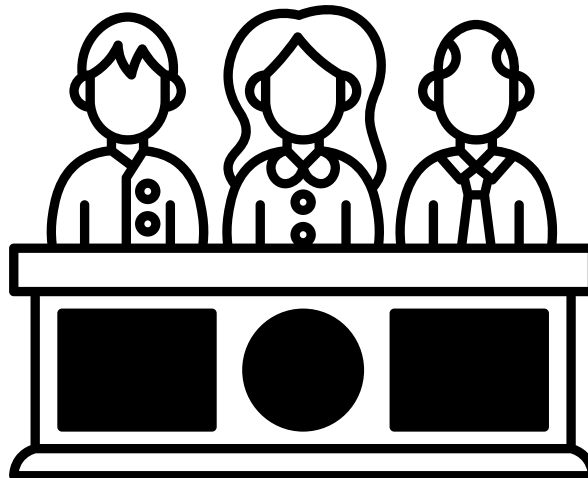


Exercise 1 – Oversight Topics

- 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

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



Your Superpowers

- 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

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

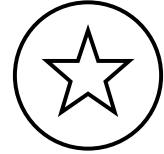


Factual Questions

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

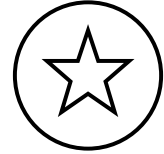
Great!	Less great...
What kinds of oil spills happen in the Great Lakes and how are they handled?	How come don't we have bigger fines for shipping companies responsible for oil spills?
How do outcomes for students receiving special education services vary across the state?	Why are the schools so bad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

10 Best Practices



1. Prioritize information gathering over confrontation
2. Treat oversight as a continuous process, not a single hearing
3. Institutionalize the use of evidence, especially audits
4. Build and actively use oversight capacity
5. Use diverse avenues of oversight

10 Best Practices



6. Foster bipartisan collaboration and coordinated oversight
7. Leverage committee expertise and specialization
8. Establish clear accountability relationships
9. Prioritize based on risk, scale, and impact
10. Make oversight accessible to the public

Questions?

Next: Oversight Planning Exercise

Oversight Planning Exercise

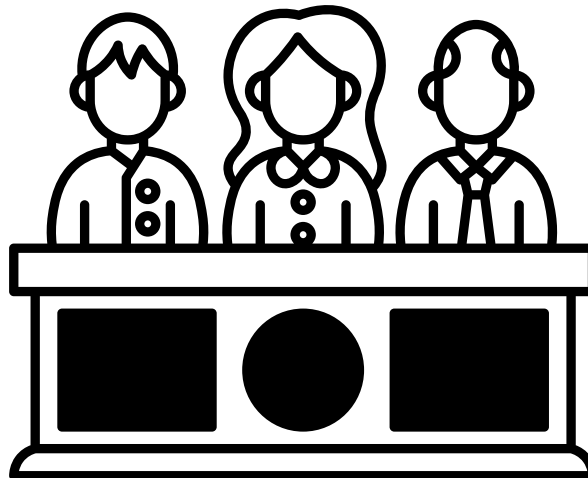
Topic	Open-ended factual question	Facts and data to pursue	Resources and oversight avenues

Oversight Planning Exercise

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

Avenues for State Legislative Oversight

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- Appropriations process
- Committees
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Advancing Oversight. Strengthening Democracy.

Learn more about Oversight Training Program:



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levin-center.org