



LANSING REGIONAL
SmartZone

2024-25
IMPACT REPORT

**DRIVING TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT,
INNOVATION, AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH**

CRAFTING THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION

This year, the Lansing Regional SmartZone (LRSZ) advanced with purpose, transforming bold ideas into measurable outcomes. With every new partnership formed, program launched, and founder supported, we strengthened the foundation of a more connected, inclusive, and future-ready economy. East Lansing is not just a place where innovation happens—it is becoming the place innovation calls home.

We have seen firsthand how entrepreneurial vision, when paired with the right resources, accelerates business growth and fortifies the economic future of our region.

Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Local Development Finance Authority, Michigan State University Research Foundation, the City of East Lansing, and a wide array of dedicated community partners, LRSZ made remarkable strides this past year, and continues to cultivate an environment where early-stage businesses can thrive. **Together, we are building an inclusive, forward-looking ecosystem that champions the innovators and technologies shaping the economy of the future.**

East Lansing is increasingly recognized as a hub for high-tech innovation, and the SmartZone plays a vital role in shaping that identity with purpose and pride.

To every partner, community member, and supporter: thank you. Your belief in our mission powers the future we are creating, one startup at a time.

With appreciation,



Angel Miller
Former Director



Abbie Tykocki
Board Chair

Meet the Small Business and Innovation Team (SBI)

Angel Miller

Former Director, Lansing Regional SmartZone

Harrison Leffel-Jones

Vice President of Small Business & Innovation

Tony Willis

Chief Equity Development Officer

Jazmin Anderson

Director of Small Business & Equity Programs

Cyrina Thomas

Inclusive Business Support Manager

Aurora Lemieux-Mckissic

Small Business Programs Coordinator

Nikki Flores

TREK Small Business Support Hub Program Manager

Adriana Lopez-Ellis

Small Business Liaison

Ryan Nelson

Former Gateway Representative (Tech Grant Manager)

BOARD MEMBERS

Angel Miller, Former Director of the Lansing Regional SmartZone at LEAP

Harrison Leffel-Jones, Vice President of Small Business & Innovation at LEAP

Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Joint Local Development Finance Authority Board Members

Abigail Tykocki, Chair, City of East Lansing

Traci Riehl, Vice Chair, City of Lansing

Kris Klein, Treasurer, Lansing Economic Development Corporation, City of Lansing

Benjamin Bakken, Lansing Community College

Irene Cahill, Ingham County

Charles Hasemann, Michigan State University, City of East Lansing

Jon Laing, Lansing School District

Mark Meadows, City of East Lansing

Nicole Millsap, Lansing School District

Glenn Mitcham, East Lansing Public Schools

Christian Palasty, East Lansing Public Schools

Jill Rhode, City of East Lansing

David Washburn, Michigan State University Research Foundation, City of Lansing

Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Program Committee

Charles Hasemann, Chair, Michigan State University, City of East Lansing

Kris Klein, Lansing Economic Development Corporation, City of Lansing

David Washburn, Michigan State University Research Foundation, City of Lansing



Entrepreneur pitches at
Hatching pitch competition
during 517 Entrepreneurship
& Innovation Week

Interested in seeing
our financials?
Visit our website
and head over to the
[About Us](#) section!

KEY STATS



16 new companies created



300 businesses supported through SmartZone services



\$18M in private and public funds raised



25 events hosted/attended



1,200 client touchpoints



TIC occupancy rose to **90%**, the highest rate of occupancy since COVID-19



2,800 cups of coffee and conversations



Keynote speaker Jillian Lorenz presents at 2025 517 Entrepreneurship & Innovation Week capstone event



Participant asking question during a 2025 517 Entrepreneurship & Innovation Week event



INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

517 Entrepreneurship & Innovation Week

LRSZ joined with planning partners Lansing Economic Area Partnership (LEAP), MSU Research Foundation, MSU Burgess Institute, and MSU Innovation Center to host the region's inaugural 517 Entrepreneurship & Innovation Week (#517EI25)!

Over 1,300 attendees came together for 21 events, held March 31 to April 4, 2025, celebrating the innovation driving our region forward.

From mixers to panels to pitch competitions, the dynamic week of programming brought together founders, investors, students, and community leaders, catalyzing connections and collaboration across the Tri-County Region.

LRSZ and LEAP co-hosted the capstone event, Bridging Entrepreneurship: Connecting Campus & Community, featuring a keynote from national workout franchise owner-turned-investor Jillian Lorenz (Exit Quotient Ventures) and a panel of successful local entrepreneurs, including Jim Curran (Founder, Great Lakes Reality Labs), Marcus Leslie (Founder, Mr. Leslie's Cheesecakes), Yuktha Pulavarthi (Founder, macaronza!), and Douglas Salazar (Co-founder, Mowr Technologies).

LRSZ and LEAP teamed up again to bring back the Hatching pitch competition, and awarded three winners each in the youth and adult competitions a cash prize to invest in their businesses.

Visit 517ei.com to explore past events and learn more about 2026 programming.

Community Mentor-in-Residence Program

LRSZ connects entrepreneurs to business resources and mentorship through the Community Mentor-in-Residence Program, which plays a big role in accelerating technologies from concept to market.

Rebecca Roman is the dedicated Mentor-in-Residence (MIR) at Spartan Innovations who supports LRSZ startup clients. She guides founders through business blueprinting, building and validating their business model, strategy, budgeting, and more to launch a viable company.

In FY24-25, the MIR team served 40 clients. Emphasizing our commitment to equitable opportunities, 76% of clients served were underrepresented entrepreneurs.

MIR program support contributed to the creation and retention of 54 jobs; made 75 referrals to 17 community partners to further support businesses; and achieved a 94% success rate in grant submissions and funding.

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Attending these global events expands the realm of possibility for our region, bringing back best practices and insights into how we can lead innovation, small business support, and growth.

Harrison Leffel-Jones

VP of Small Business & Innovation at LEAP

SXSW

LRSZ and LEAP sponsored a delegation of business leaders representing the Lansing Region to showcase their ideas at #SXSW in Austin, Texas, one of the biggest stages for innovation.

The team returned from the conference energized and inspired by speakers, conversations, and new ideas.

BRCē won the Midwest Madness Pitch Competition by showing how they developed the world's first and only shoelaces that never come untied.



Lansing business leaders at SXSW

Fund Your Acceleration

LRSZ, in collaboration with the Lansing Economic Area Partnership (LEAP), Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), and MSU Research Foundation, **deployed \$358,021** through the 2024 Fund Your Acceleration (FYA) program—a bold initiative fueling startup growth across the Greater Lansing region.

The FYA program simplifies startup access to funding, services, and resources across local and statewide networks.

These funds cover critical services for startups, including legal support for incorporation and patents, website development, market research, small grants for equipment and software, mentorship and peer learning opportunities, and more.

The companies supported by the Fund Your Acceleration program span a range of industries and technologies, representing the diversity and ingenuity that define the Greater Lansing entrepreneurial community.



Adventent Biotherapeutics, a recipient of the FYA program

Capital Area Startup Studio

The Capital Area Startup Studio (CASS), led by Gravity Works Design and

CustomerIQ (formerly Bold Growth), is one of Lansing's most impactful new programs for early-stage entrepreneurs. In just nine months, the studio helped founders build real tech products and generate revenue.

CASS provides hands-on support to help founders go from idea to product to sales—faster and with less risk. It's designed to save entrepreneurs time, money, and guesswork.



Studio Wins

- Founders generated over \$25,000 in sales within three months.
- Founders gained the skills and tools to build websites, launch minimum viable products (MVPs), and grow their businesses using Bolt and other low-code solutions.
- Launched the Lansing Tech Resource Hub, a website filled with DIY content and how-to guides for aspiring builders.

Companies Built in the Studio

ZettaVue

A platform that helps photographers and marketing agencies show clients how to improve their Google Business Profiles and boost local visibility. The go-to-market strategy shows potential to hit six-figure revenue as a solo founder.



Richardson & Richardson Events

A tech-enabled event management service serving both corporate and nonprofit clients.



CreatorPulse and Just the Recipe Card

Tools that help food creators better understand their audiences and deliver stronger content experiences.



ENTREPRENEUR SPOTLIGHTS

BRCĒ

BRCĒ makes the world's first and only shoelaces that never come untied.

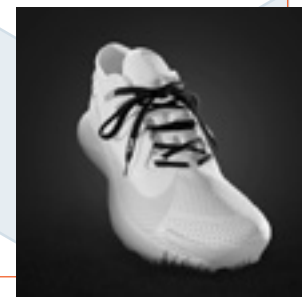
BRCĒ's patented micro-grip technology makes the laces untie-proof, weather resistant, and lightweight to enhance athletic performance.

The laces are precision-engineered and tension-calibrated for each sport, improving performance and preventing injury by supporting ankle alignment, pressure distribution, and overall stability.

LRSZ and LEAP provided early-stage funding to scale up the startup.

Launched in 2024 by Michigan State University students Madhav Aggarwal and Tanvi Gadamsetti, the material-tech company changing the future of sports performance has been featured at SXSW 2025 (where they won the Midwest Madness Pitch Competition), CES 2025, Techstars Founder Catalyst 2024, and Sneaker Con Detroit 2024.

The NBA, NFL, NCAA, and PGA now use BRCĒ as their new lace standard.



BRCĒ shoelace product

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We're the first startup out of MSU to be selected for the main SXSW Pitch. This is a global stage, so it makes us extremely proud, but we back ourselves on the support we've received from the Lansing community.

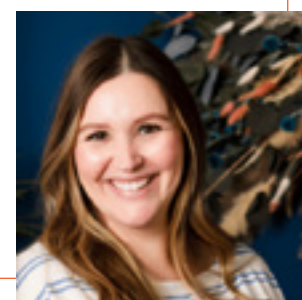
BRCĒ

Madhav Aggarwal
Co-Founder of BRCĒ

CreatorPulse

Dr. Kristen Wager developed CreatorPulse to empower social media content creators with actionable audience insights that fuel authentic engagement and lasting growth.

A Ph.D. research expert, Dr. Wager designed easy-to-use survey tools that seamlessly integrate into a creator's webpage or socials to better understand what their audiences care most about. The Creator Impact Score™ is the first real-time metric built to show a creator's true effect on audience behavior. CreatorPulse gives creators the feedback they need to make smarter decisions, create with confidence, back up their value, and even land better brand deals.



Dr. Kristen Wager

Dr. Wager was part of the first cohort of the Capital Area Startup Studio (CASS), a new initiative LRSZ launched for early-stage entrepreneurs to receive hands-on support building tech products. “This experience became a pivotal moment for my company—it’s where the idea for CreatorPulse and the Creator Impact Score® truly came to life,” she says. During the program, she rebranded from BrandSense Research to CreatorPulse, slightly tweaked the direction of the company, and refined her marketing pitch. The program set clear growth milestones, and the CASS team helped her stay on track to achieve those goals.

She also received a Fund Your Acceleration (FYA) grant to support her company’s launch. LRSZ jointly funds the FYA program, which simplifies access to funding and services for startups.

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I’m grateful for the expert guidance. I look forward to transforming my vision into a resource that will empower creators to build stronger, more data-informed brands.



Dr. Kristen Wager
Founder of CreatorPulse

VERN AI

VERN AI, the Virtual Emotion Resource Network, is powering emotionally intelligent AI products—including AI companions, voice assistants, custom chatbots, and more—across healthcare, customer experience, education, and other sectors. The tech company is innovating the emotional capacity of AI to help businesses provide a more emotionally intelligent, human-like experience where interactions feel more empathetic, responsive, and trusted.

VERN is an Emotion Recognition System (ERS) that detects human emotions. VERN analyzes each sentence, scores and measures emotions, tracks emotional trends, and integrates into its client’s AI system to adjust chatbot tone or response style and trigger other actions.

LRSZ and LEAP supported this boundary-pushing company with a Fund Your Acceleration grant and a sponsorship to represent the Lansing Region at SXSW in 2025.



VERN AI receives funding from FYA program

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I will continue to shout from the rooftops that LEAP is amazing and does great things for our community. I have been so thankful for the support.



Craig Tucker
CEO of VERN AI



Attendees networking at 517
Entrepreneurship & Innovation
Week event

KEY PROGRAMS

\$18M invested and 52 jobs created through Lansing Regional SmartZone [programs and services](#)

Community Mentor-in-Residence (MSU Research Foundation)

- **\$1,409,051** in total funding (public and private)
- **40** clients served (**76%** underserved)
- **14** jobs created
- **17** new client companies created
- **17** community partners engaged
- **75** referrals
- **7** clients attracted from outside the region
- **2** clients retained in region

Local Accelerator Funds (LAF) Program

- **\$54,767** local accelerator grants funded
- **301** companies served
- **16** company formations
- **Services included:**
 - » Market research to qualify product market fit
 - » Marketing plans, website design, branding packages
 - » Patent/IP legal fees
 - » Incorporation changes
 - » Jumpstart Tech Program (rent subsidy)

Conquer and Cade (MSU Research Foundation)

- **\$1,514,000** in total funding (public and private)
- **6** clients served (**83%** underserved)
- **5 interns** (all from MSU)
- **2** client companies retained in the region

99 Problems but a Pitch Ain't One (The Fledge)

- **\$4,455** in private funding
- **58** participants (**77%** underserved)
- **3** new clients created
- **43** partner referrals
- **15 K-12** students served

Teens in Entrepreneurship (The Fledge)

- Partners engaged: LEAP, Lansing School District, Eaton Rapids School District, Dewitt School District, Grand Ledge School District, East Lansing Public Schools, Okemos School District
- **17** client companies served (**67%** underserved)

Thank you to our partners:



Capital Area Startup Studio (Gravity Works Design & CustomerIQ)

- **\$17,000** public funding
- **5** clients served (**100%** underserved)
- **5** jobs created
- **52** partner referrals
- **25** contracts secured by clients

Business Made Simple (LEAP)

- **12** client companies served (**75%** underserved)
- **Workshops included:**
 - » AI for business functions
 - » Design made simple: Canva basics
 - » Calendar management

YouTube Show for Startups (mConnexions)

- **2** clients served (**50%** underserved)
- **46,340** views
- **59%** YouTube channel growth

Startup Grind Events (Startup Grind Lansing)

- **161** clients served (**54%** underserved)
- **19** events
- Partners engaged: LEAP, LRSZ, Lansing Codes, CATECH, MISEC, Coldfusion, SQL Server, GLUGNET, Tech Inclusive, MSU Research Foundation, Foster Swift Collins & Smith, Flying with Founders, Expert Connexions, mConnexions, Washington Avenue Advisors

Apple Developer Academy (Ingham County 4-H MSU Extension)

- **200** K-12 students served
- Partners engaged: Lansing School District, East Lansing Public Schools, Ingham County Parks (Foster Community Center and Letts Community Center), Boys and Girls Club of Lansing, Delta Township Community Library, East Lansing Public Library

INNOVATE WITH US!



@LansingRegionalSmartZone



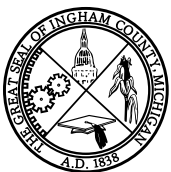
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LansingRegionalSmartZone.com



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DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

