



**EMPOWER
MISSOURI
ANTI-POVERTY
ADVOCATES
SUMMIT 2026**

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125
YEARS OF

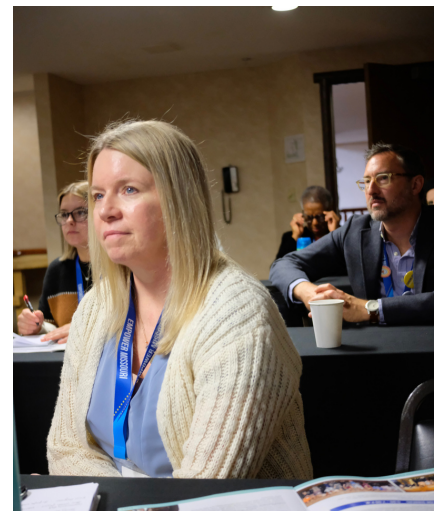
2026

PEOPLE-POWERED POLICY CHANGE

EVENT PREVIEW

October 1st & 2nd

**Courtyard by Marriott,
Columbia, MO**



EmpowerMissouri.org/Summit



SUMMIT PREVIEW

PEOPLE-POWERED POLICY CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU

WHY ATTEND OUR 125TH ANNUAL SUMMIT

For 125 years, Empower has served as a voice for the people of Missouri, pushing for the policy changes that have provided key protections and better lives for poor, working- and middle-class families who make up the heartbeat of our state. And by Empower, we don't just mean our staff and board—we mean our coalition members, council members, and the thousands of citizens who raise their voices in unison against the powerful interests who seek to hoard wealth and opportunity for themselves. People-powered policy change starts with YOU, and that's why we're inviting you to join us for our Annual Summit. This two-day event includes three keynote speakers, over 20 skill-building, policy education, and strategy sessions, and networking with hundreds of like-minded advocates from across the state. It won't be the same without you, so use the template below to make the case to your boss, your spouse, your mom— whoever you need to get permission from to come scheme with us for a couple of days!

MAKING THE CASE TO YOUR EMPLOYER (OR WHOEVER ELSE...)

I heard recently about this Anti-Poverty Advocates Summit from Empower Missouri. They have been hosting this event for 125 years, bringing together nonprofit professionals and volunteer advocates from across the state who are working to improve food security, affordable housing, the criminal legal system, healthcare access and other issues impacting poverty and wellbeing. I'd like to go and connect with other folks who are working on the same issues that we are across the state and see if I can build my skills and knowledge on topics that might help us better serve our clients. I'm particularly interested in this session **[SEE EVENT SCHEDULE FOR IDEAS] because [HOW IT MIGHT HELP YOU/YOUR ORG]**. If you have any questions about the event, you can reach out to Sarah Owsley at Empower MO, sarah@empowermissouri.org. I really think it will help me in my role and I trust the information we get from Empower to be relevant and useful. Thanks for considering.





SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

The 2026 Anti-Poverty Advocates Summit is two days full of impactful strategy sessions, community building, and **action to fight poverty in Missouri**. Each breakout session will offer four options, centered on affordable housing, criminal legal system reform, food insecurity, and cross-sector issues.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1ST

REGISTRATION & NETWORKING

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

OPENING KEYNOTE & LUNCH

12:00 - 1:30 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

1:45 - 2:45 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

Including Coalition Work Time

3:00 - 4:00 PM

POLICY WINS CELEBRATION RECEPTION

5:30 - 6:30 PM

125TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

6:30 - 9:30 PM

**Included with your ticket.*

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2ND

COALITION BREAKFAST

8:30 - 10:00 AM

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

10:15 AM - 11:30 AM

AFTERNOON KEYNOTE & LUNCH

11:30 AM - 12:45 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 4

1:00 - 2:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 5

2:15 - 3:15 PM



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

THURSDAY KEYNOTES



Our first keynote will come from Dr. Debra Foster Greene, professor emerita of United States History at Lincoln University in Jefferson City.

Dr. Foster Greene is an expert on Missouri history, serving on several local and state commissions including the Missouri Board on Geographic Names, the City of Jefferson Historic Preservation Commission, and the Historic City of Jefferson Foundation. She is also an accomplished writer, with published works included in the National African American Biography and the Encyclopedia of the Great Black Migration, among others. Dr. Foster Greene will open our Summit with a look back at the political landscape of Missouri over Empower's 125 year history, the role the nonprofit sector has played, and how we got to this moment in our state. Together, we'll take lessons from our history as we look towards the next 25 years of advocacy to build a better Missouri.

Our second keynote on Thursday will be at a special anniversary dinner event commemorating Empower Missouri's 125 anniversary with all of our dearest partners, supporters, and friends.

(Dinner tickets are included with your Summit registration!) The event will be a joyful

celebration of our collective work, kicking off with a champagne reception to toast our shared legislative victories over the last five years.

During the dinner event, Empower Missouri Executive Director Mallory Rusch will provide a short keynote address reflecting on how the lessons of Missouri's past can fuel our collective wins in the future. We will also be recognizing the sustaining achievements of extraordinary advocates who have made, and are making, an incredible difference in the lives of Missourians across the state. We're thrilled to have all of our Summit participants join us in dressing up and partying down to celebrate this special occasion, which is sure to be filled with special surprises and memorable moments.

Congratulations

to the recipients of the 2026
Advocacy Awards

Sustaining Impact in Affordable Housing
Wayne Crawford, Missouri Inclusive Housing

Sustaining Impact in Community Justice
Tracy Stanton

Sustaining Impact in Food Security
Harvesters

Sustaining Impact in Rural Advocacy
Rhonda Perry, MO Rural Crisis Center

Sustaining Impact in Health & Welfare
NAMI St. Louis

Emerging Advocate
Sheena Rogers, Show Me Justice for All

Lifetime of Service to Empower Missouri
Phil Minden & Julie Birkenmaier

FRIDAY KEYNOTE - COMING SOON!



BREAKOUT PREVIEW

COMMUNITY JUSTICE SESSIONS

FILLING GAPS IN THE REENTRY LANDSCAPE

Presented by: Brittany Peterson, Fair Chance KC

Too often, communities respond to poverty by creating new programs, when the real challenge is fragmented systems that make it difficult for people to access opportunity. This session explores how misaligned policies, disconnected services, and institutional barriers can undermine progress, even when resources are available. Through examples from workforce development, justice-impacted populations, and cross-sector collaboration, participants will examine practical strategies for reducing barriers, strengthening partnerships, and building systems that create lasting pathways to economic stability and upward mobility.

FREEDOM AIN'T FREE - DISRUPTING THE POVERTY-TO-PRISON PIPELINE PRETRIAL

Presented by: Dawn Oliver-Ramsey, Operation Liberation

Race, poverty and access are the primary drivers of criminalization, crimmigration, pretrial detention and surveillance, which have long plagued marginalized communities through interconnected systems of policing, borders, and incarceration.

Black, Indigenous, and migrant communities are criminalized long before conviction through bond systems, detention, surveillance, and coercive plea deals. This interactive workshop explores participatory defense, pretrial survival strategies, self-governance, and community-led defense practices that challenge and disrupt incarceration before trial ever begins – allowing community to fight their cases from a position of support and freedom.

VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

Presented by: Sarah Felts, Missouri Voter Protection Coalition

Good Voting Rights News in Missouri?!

More than 41,000 Missourians on probation and parole have regained their voting rights, thanks to a new state law that immediately restores the right to vote to certain individuals upon release from incarceration. This is a momentous policy win, but that's half the battle, because a right on paper is meaningless. Learn how you can help make this expansion of voting rights a reality for people in your communities!

SPITTING & POLITICKING ... CULTURAL ORGANIZING FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Presented by: Tracy (T-Spirit) Stanton & Tau Kamau Adwin, Some Things Must Be Heard

In this session, Tracy (T-Spirit) Stanton, owner/founder of Some Things Must Be Heard: Spitting & Politicking, and Tau Kamau Adwin will discuss the importance, value, effectiveness, and necessity of embedding art into our campaigns, strategic planning sessions, community meetings, movement spaces, and base-building strategies to push criminal justice reform. Doing so increases capacity, builds people power, expands our narrative ecosystem, and has the ability to deepen our connections to each other and the political climate on a spiritual and emotional level.



BREAKOUT PREVIEW

CROSS-SECTOR SESSIONS

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS MATTER: SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN FACING ADVERSITY

Presented by: Deanna Finch, United 4 Children

The first five years of life are a critical period of brain development that shapes lifelong learning, behavior, and health. Children experiencing poverty are more likely to face chronic stress and adverse experiences that can affect social-emotional development, school readiness, and long-term outcomes. This session explores how early trauma and poverty influence the developing brain and highlights the protective factors that help children build resilience. Participants will leave with practical strategies for creating responsive environments that support healing and healthy development.

SETTING THE CONDITIONS TO THRIVE: WHAT A TOMATO PLANT CAN TEACH US ABOUT POVERTY, OPPORTUNITY, AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

Presented by: Ronda Dorsey, GOTURSIX

When a tomato plant struggles to grow, we do not blame the plant. We examine the conditions around it: soil, water, sunlight, and pests. This interactive workshop uses that same lens to explore how poverty, opportunity, and economic mobility are shaped by conditions such as housing, transportation, education, social connection, food access, and community infrastructure. Participants will leave with a practical framework for identifying barriers, organizing around community needs, and creating lasting change through advocacy and systems-level solutions.

EXPLORING COLLABORATIVE DYNAMICS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND TENSIONS IN MULTI-GENERATIONAL COALITION WORK

Presented by: Patrilie Hernandez, Embody Lib, LLC

Generational differences shape every collaborative space, yet most groups never learn how to talk about them, let alone navigate them effectively. This session explores generational tensions and assumptions that impact organizing work, helping participants see past generational labels to the real strengths different age groups bring to working collaboratively. Walk away with practical tools to build cross-generational trust and clear actions you can use in your own organizational or organizing work.

MO IMMIGRATION POLICY: IMPACTS AND ADVOCACY

Presented by: Jessica Trout, MO Immigration Policy Coalition/SLU Center for Social Action

The rise in racist targeting of immigrant communities has plagued the entire US under the current administration. This session will be an overview of the policies and practices in Missouri targeting immigrants and refugees, especially Latinos and other international populations of color. The session will include data from a variety of MIPC partners, including MICA Project's Police to ICE Pipeline work, Ashrei's data from the Rapid Response Coalition, and MIPC legislative tracking.

BRILLIANT BUT BROKE: WHY CAPABILITY ALONE NO LONGER GUARANTEES OPPORTUNITY

Presented by: Crysta'I Omodehinde, HealthCare on Wheels

Many people were told that education, hard work, and integrity would guarantee stability, yet many capable individuals remain overworked, under-supported, and economically vulnerable. This workshop examines the growing disconnect between merit and access, especially among caregivers, first-generation professionals, underserved communities, and rural populations. Together, we will explore how workforce systems unintentionally overlook talent and what organizations can do to create clearer pathways toward opportunity, retention, and sustainable success.



BREAKOUT PREVIEW

FOOD SECURITY + SOCIAL SAFETY NET SESSIONS

Full schedule coming soon!

BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER THROUGH MEDICAID STORYTELLING

Presented by: Riisa Rawlins, Community Health Commission of Missouri

Too often, conversations about Medicaid are reduced to enrollment numbers, utilization reports, budgets, and policy debates while those most affected remain unheard. We often divide Missouri into urban, rural, and suburban communities, as though geography alone defines our experiences. Yet when barriers to healthcare emerge, those distinctions begin to fade. While every community has its own history, assets, and context, the consequences of fragmented systems, administrative burden, and governmental neglect reveal a shared reality: people across Missouri are navigating many of the same barriers to care in different zip codes.

INTRODUCING THE MISSOURI FOOD SYSTEMS CHARTER

Presented by: Maile Auterson, Ronda Dorsey, Trina Ragain, and Amanda Berry

Food insecurity is not simply the absence of food—it is the result of interconnected economic, health, workforce, and community systems. Missouri's Food System Charter is a statewide, community-driven roadmap developed through collaboration among stakeholders across every sector of the food system to strengthen local economies, improve food access, support farmers and food businesses, expand workforce opportunities, and build more resilient communities. This session will introduce the Charter's vision, priorities, and actionable strategies while exploring how organizations, community leaders, and policymakers can work together to advance long-term solutions that reduce poverty and strengthen Missouri's food system.

WHAT CHANGE DO YOU WANT TO SEE FOR FOOD SYSTEMS IN MISSOURI? A DIALOGUE WITH FARM, THE FOOD & AGRICULTURE RESEARCH MISSION AT WASHU

Presented by: Todd Combs and Mark Doyle, Bursky School of Public Health at Washington University

This session, presented by Food and Agriculture Research Mission (FARM) at WashU's Bursky School of Public Health, will focus on discussion issues that matter most for participants interested in food systems and food security including sustainable agriculture in Missouri. Established in 2025, FARM aspires to catalyze transformative, interdisciplinary science and practice through a public health-centered approach to food and agriculture to ensure access to healthy, sustainable diets for all. After a brief overview of the goals of FARM, its current work, and opportunities for collaboration, participants will share their thoughts and collectively brainstorm on the most pressing public health issues in food systems in Missouri to refine research and programmatic priorities for FARM and its collaborators. Come share your ideas!

ONE ADDITIONAL FOOD SECURITY SESSION TO BE ANNOUNCED SOON!



BREAKOUT PREVIEW

AFFORDABLE HOUSING SESSIONS

Full schedule coming soon!

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: HOUSING FOR MISSOURI'S ECONOMIC AND HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Presented by: Nathan James, MBA-HCA, MPH, Build MO Health

Housing affordability is a critical structural determinant of healthcare workforce stability in Missouri, directly influencing recruitment, retention, and long-term system capacity. This session will concentrate on a research project which examined the intersection of housing conditions and healthcare workforce outcomes across all 114 Missouri counties and the City of St. Louis, integrating data from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Missouri Hospital Association workforce reports, and multiple state and federal housing datasets. Using a combined framework of Housing Market Functional Areas (HMFAs), Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), and nonmetropolitan regions, the analysis identifies geographic variation in housing strain and workforce affordability across urban, suburban, and rural communities.

A CASE STUDY IN ACCESSIBLE HOUSING: JORDAN'S PLACE

Presented by: Katheryne Staeger-Wilson, MSW, LCSW and Joyce Fenner

Missouri is facing a serious affordable housing crisis. For people with disabilities, the challenge is even greater because housing must also be accessible and usable, while offering the dignity of choice and inclusion. This session explores how one person's leadership led to the creation of Jordan's Place in Marshfield, Missouri, accessible homes built around a community center to encourage connection and belonging. It is an intentionally inclusive neighborhood where people with and without disabilities live together as part of one community.

TENANT ORGANIZING IN MISSOURI: BUILDING POWER FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Presented by: Jai Byrd, Data Lead, Columbia Tenants Union and Member, Springfield Tenants Unite

Come learn about how tenants across Missouri are organizing to build power and win. This will be an introduction to tenant unions and organizing directly from local tenant union leaders. The session will cover the basics of organizing, the campaigns that current tenant unions are working on, and how to start a tenant union in your area.

PROTECTING YOUR NEIGHBORS AND COMMUNITY FROM CONTRACT FOR DEED HOUSING SCAMS

Presented by: Lisa D'Souza, Robert Swearingen, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri and Patrick Fowler, PhD, Washington University in St. Louis

A small down payment and a low monthly rate make predatory contract for deed sales attractive, particularly given the scarcity of affordable housing. Purchasers don't know that the sale price is 2-4x the appraised value, nor do they know that the interest rate far exceeds the prime offer rate. They soon discover the steep costs of repair and cannot make the home habitable while also making their monthly payments. Sellers seek an eviction, usually within days of the first missed payment, and Missouri's speedy housing docket efficiently returns the property into the sellers hands. We'll discuss ideas for advocacy to protect and empower our neighbors and community.