



STATE OF MICHIGAN  
JOCELYN BENSON, SECRETARY OF STATE  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
LANSING

**Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson**  
**Testimony to Michigan House Oversight Committee**  
**June 24, 2025**

Good morning and thank you all for having me here today.

Before we start, I want to say two things.

First, I want to thank you all for inviting me here today, and for your increased oversight into our department. I believe government works best when we are partners, and I greatly appreciate your interest level in our department's work because it makes us better.

As you'll see in the slides ahead, and as I know many of you experienced yourself over the last month, our department has made a great deal of progress in working to ensure the Michigan Transparency Network is on its way to becoming a modern, user-friendly, cost effective program that enables Michiganders to have access to information on who is influencing your decisions, and all of you as users to be able to provide that information with ease, accuracy, and timeliness.

Secondly, I want to acknowledge the environment we are in right now. We all experienced the trauma of the devastating political assassinations and violence in Minnesota on June 14.

I know that some of you on this committee have been targets of personal threats directed at both you and your families. I hope all of you and your families are safe, and my department stands ready to work with every lawmaker and leader in this state to help ensure we are doing all we can to ensure your safety.

The last thing I'll say at the outset is that I do believe in the importance of fair, bipartisan oversight, and I believe we all should be committed to transparency on behalf of the people we serve.

To that end I've appreciated the members of this committee who have asked thoughtful questions, rooted in your own experience and background, provided helpful feedback, and worked with us to ensure we have an online portal that is an upgrade over the antiquated

system I inherited and delivers transparency, accessibility, and clarity for Michigan voters.

### **Successful overhauls of an antiquated system**

I want to be clear about something: I don't believe in kicking cans down the road for someone else to deal with. I lead with a sense of urgency and a commitment to getting things done, even if it's hard.

I don't believe voters sent any of us here to Lansing to just maintain a mediocre status quo. Voters sent all of us here to make things better.

That means we need to be willing to tackle big, complicated systems and make necessary improvements that move Michigan into the modern era and make government work better for everyone.

This also means there are sometimes bumps in the road and things don't go as smoothly as I would have liked. Transformational change does not happen easily. It is the harder path.

But just because things are hard, and difficult at first, doesn't mean we run away or sit on our hands and do nothing.

For example, when I was first elected, it was not possible for eligible Michigan citizens to register to vote online. So, the first year of my first term, we worked with DTMB to build and then launch the state's first online voter registration system through the Michigan Voter Information Center. This system now processes tens of thousands of voter registration updates every year, helping us increase the accuracy of our voter rolls in a more efficient and secure way than ever before.

Another example. When I was first elected wait times in the Secretary of State branch offices were abysmal.

My administration also overhauled Michigan's entire motor vehicle data system, modernizing it so Michigan residents could get more things done online, or to easily schedule their branch visit ahead of time. That system, known as CARS, helped us eliminate those unacceptable wait times and make things easier for every one of your constituents.

And finally, when Michigan voters overwhelmingly amended our constitution in 2022, they called on us to enable them to vote in person, early, before every statewide election.

So we built and launched the state's first ever Early Voting E-Pollbook platform. We developed this software with feedback from clerks across the state, and in doing so, built a system that made early voting a secure, smooth, convenient experience for the 1.2 million

eligible Michiganders who used it in 2024.

I share this with you all to add context to today's discussion. At any given time, the Michigan Department of State is successfully overhauling antiquated systems and modernizing state government in a way that saves people time, saves the state money, and makes people's lives easier.

And this is what is also happening with the Michigan Transparency Network.

Every Secretary of State before me knew that our campaign finance system needed an overhaul. The data was literally saved onto a floppy disk – just like our driver's license data was on microfiche until we upgraded that system.

And here's the thing: that archaic way of doing things ultimately costs the state more money to maintain if we don't roll up our sleeves and fix it.

Yes, we experienced unanticipated setbacks in the short term, and like all of you, I'm not happy with that either. But I am so proud of my team for fighting through the difficult moments and challenges with one goal: to replace archaic, broken systems in a way that is cost-efficient, accessible, accurate, transparent and easy to use.

So, with that context, I want to talk about MERTS specifically.

**MERTS: Old, outdated, hard to use.**

As you know, MERTS was an old and outdated system. It was first implemented a quarter of a century ago – the year 2000. Just to put that into context, when MERTS was implemented Representative Farhat was four months old, and Representative Linting wasn't even born yet.

For 25 years every Secretary of State heard complaints about MERTS. It was difficult to use, you lost the data every time you changed computers and you could only use certain computers with it. Some folks told me they'd have to buy computers for their campaigns just to file their MERTs reports.

The complexity and outdated nature of the legacy data makes it extremely difficult to transfer it into a new and better system.

One of the many problems with MERTS is that it never validated data, so that old records often had different spellings of the same person's name, various fields contain multiple pieces of information, and the formatting of the system's 24 million records created complex computer science problems that are difficult to solve efficiently, quickly, and at scale.

Our new system is not just a website application. It's a multi-user group case management system with a Google-like search engine attached. What the new system is doing is bringing campaign finance data that previously lived in three different systems together into one shared database, enabling new searchable fields like the ability to search across committees that share a common treasurer or mailing address.

The combination of these data sources will ultimately allow users to get a more rounded picture of campaign finance disclosures and the flow of money in Michigan politics. But it does mean we are taking on a complex project.

Our vendor's initial planning of the project did not sufficiently appreciate or measure the risk of combining all these data sources across the 25 years of ancient data. That is what led to the delays and performance issues we experienced at launch.

That's what our team and theirs is meticulously, carefully, working together every single day to fix.

I know you're thinking: why didn't you just switch back to MERTs once these problems arose? Why not keep the old system going until the wheels fell off?

Because our contract to maintain MERTS was up, and I did not want to invest additional taxpayer dollars into a dying, outdated system.

### **Costs of MERTS vs. MiTN**

The contract to maintain MERTS expired in 2024, after the state exercised its last available contract extension. That contract cost \$18 million over 9 years. That's an average maintenance cost of over \$1.8 million per year. Just to keep the old thing going.

In contrast, the state's contract to build, upgrade, modernize *and* maintain MiTN, is \$9 million over the next 5 years. I want to be clear – that doesn't mean we've already paid \$9 million to Tyler – that's the 5-year contract total.

That means the annual cost to maintain MiTN, including the cost of building out the new system, modernizing and upgrading all that old data on floppy disks, *and* continuing to maintain and improve it for the next 5 years, is \$1.2 million per year.

In other words MiTN – a modern new system – is also saving taxpayer dollars.

And our vendor will refund the state for any downtime we experienced over the last several months and throughout this transition. Currently that refund stands at \$166,000.

I really want to thank Tyler Technologies for their all-hands-on-deck approach when their product encountered unexpected issues. They are consistently working with us – at the

highest levels - to move things forward. But I have also made it clear that the state pay only when we have a system that is functioning as contracted.

With that, I want to now talk about how the state is working with Tyler Technologies to improve the system.

### **Process Improvements since May 2025**

In the last several weeks, I've had tough conversations with our team about how this happened; the issues, the snafus, and how we would move forward.

And I want you to know how proud I am that every single one of them – and others in our department who have leaned in as well – have worked together - oftentimes until 11:00 at night only to start at 8:00am the next day, including on weekends, because like me they are dedicated and committed to getting this right. I am personally ensuring that we continue to do this over the months ahead.

We are making improvements, not just to the system, but to our own internal testing, training, and launch processes.

My predecessor, Candace Miller, once told me to never forget that the biggest room is the room for improvement. And we have lived that every day during my administration.

We've conducted additional rounds of user research, added more support from various DTMB functions and increased our level and layers of review for go-live decisions to a meticulous level.

I want to specifically thank our Chief of Staff, Tina Anderson, for overseeing not just the improvement of this project, but the improvement of how we do projects overall, ensuring we will be able to continue to do transformational things in this office with even smoother transitions in the future.

We are also working with Tyler Technologies on a Corrective Action Plan to ensure we have an agreed upon, contract-enforceable plan moving forward for our work with them. And finally we revamped our Go-Live approval processes to ensure before things go live, we catch and manage any issues or risks as we launch any new technology releases. So now I want to talk about those new technology releases that we have gone through over the last several weeks and then talk about what we will be going through in the weeks ahead.

### **Technology fixes since May 2025**

Now I want to dive into specific improvements we have made since May, including significant software fixes to search functions across the Michigan Transparency Network. Those fixes went live on May 31 and on June 17, and we have a third round of significant

upgrades planned for July 12.

These specific fixes include three things:

- Updating the personal financial disclosure module to be consistent with the newly enacted bills that alter the filing methods and the required content disclosures.
- Improving the public search performance of our system, resolving many of the frustrating system timeouts that users experienced earlier this year.
- Ensuring that committee balances update properly with new filings.

We have also proactively reached out to various MiTN users to incorporate their feedback before going live with these and other improvements to make sure we were addressing their specific problems and needs. We will continue that proactive work with the stakeholders who use these systems the most, to ensure we are making the most user-friendly system possible.

We don't see this as static, we are going to consistently work to continuously improve this system, just as we have to all the systems we have overhauled in the past. So, with the personal financial disclosure piece:

### **Personal Financial Disclosure Deadline**

I am happy to report that the June 13 Personal Financial Disclosure deadline went smoothly. Thank you to the committee members who submitted their filings via the MiTN module, as this makes it easier for the public to search and have access to the information. I hope your experience was as smooth as my own. I was able to submit my filing without issue back in May in 10 minutes.

Overall, we received 47 personal financial disclosures via MiTN, and 112 via emailed PDFs.

For this deadline we also significantly increased our technical support for filers. That includes:

- Training videos that are available on our website 24-7
- After-hours phone support from our staff at the Bureau of Elections, and
- We also, as you may have noticed, significantly increased email communication with filers, so they were fully aware not just of the deadlines and legal requirements and options under the law, but also so they knew we were there to help navigate any challenges with the system. Because we get it: it's a new thing for users, and with that, there will be challenges.

And we were able to resolve a handful of issues working one-on-one with filers to ensure they could file by the deadline.

### **Summary of improvements for July 2025 release**

Now, I'm going to walk you through the improvements we have planned for our July 12 release.

First, we will implement a campaign finance filing summary report, a useful tool for filers, journalists, and members of the public.

- For filings created in MiTN in July, users will be able to click on public search results to see details of an individual filing. This will include a summary page and filing schedules for each.

We will also implement several improvements for filers. In the advance of the upcoming finance deadlines, we felt this was critical to do in this moment. These include:

- The ability to pay committee and lobby fees by credit card
- Improvements to the lobby registration process

Finally, the July 12 release will include improvements to the public search function, such as:

- Users will be able to search cumulative contributions using the Campaign Finance search function
- It will be easier for users to scroll through public search results and download data into spreadsheets

### **Campaign Filing Summary Report**

In this July 12 release, we will also launch a campaign filing summary report, one of the most requested features from media and other stakeholders. This report will allow users to click on an individual filing search result and see all details for that filing, similar to the filing view in MERTS.

This summary for campaign finance reports filed in MiTN will be available in July. Filing summaries that are older, and migrated from MERTS, are currently slated for release later this summer.

### **Vision for the future**

The final thing I want to talk about is our vision for the future, which is to make sure this system is better than MERTS, in every metric possible.

At the end of the day, we are building a campaign finance search engine that will not only save the state money, it will be easier for everyone to use and easier for the public to understand. MERTS was not that.

Our goal and our vision for the future is a smooth disclosure experience for filers and a transparent tool for the public to use.

We will do that by ensuring data is accessible, complete, and accurate so the people of Michigan know what is influencing the decisions their leaders in government are making on their behalf every day.

I think we all can agree that you shouldn't need a Master's degree in campaign finance to find this information and understand what it means.

Right now, we're doing product mapping and improvement for releases in August and October of this year and for 2026. And we want to work with you on all of that.

In this moment, we also want to build out the system that works for all of you and incorporate your ideas, concerns and feedback as we collectively envision the evolution of this portal.

We have established a path to a workable, transparent, cost-efficient system, and also a process for continuing to improve it in the months and years ahead. This is critical as technology changes, as needs increase, and as laws perhaps evolve and change.

I know we'll get there. When all is said and done, Michiganders will have a modern, easy-to-use, and transparent way to track the use of money, and the influence of money, in the political arena.

Thank you again for having me here today.