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A note from the editor-in-chief



By **Masha Smahliuk-Bootz**
Editor-in-chief

Welcome back, Central Michigan University students! I hope you had a chance to spend a wonderful time with your families and to take as many naps as you wanted.

Now, as you're ready to embark on a new adventure, I hope the campus welcomes you

with warmth and love.

In this edition, *Central Michigan Life* photographers shared what the holiday season looked like for them, illuminated with Christmas lights and celebrated with friends and good food. Our editors reflected on the past year and set resolutions for the newsroom.

This is also an important time to look at the work of the Isabella County Sheriff's office. It has been over a year since the voters denied over \$3 million for the office's budget, resulting in the dismissal of its deputies. We take a closer look at what that vote means for policing here, and what impact it has had on public safety

throughout the state.

As the 2025 football season is over for the Chippewas, this edition brings news about which players entered the transfer portal and declared for the NFL Draft.

These and many other events carry over from the past year, and we're still experiencing their impact. But I also believe 2026 is going to be a new, beautiful chapter for all of us.

That's why, my advice to you, our reader, is to make happy memories, cherish moments with your loved ones and embrace what 2026 holds with an open heart.

Masha Smahliuk-Bootz
is Central Michigan Life's
2025-2026 editor-in-chief.

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Snow sat quietly on the CMU sidewalks when students were away. CM Life photographers captured the slow life of the campus over this winter break.

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This has been a big season for Central Michigan football, highlighted by the bowl game in Detroit. Head coach Matt Drinkall says the program is moving in the right direction.

Central Michigan Life, the independent voice of Central Michigan University, is edited and published by students of Central Michigan University the first Thursday of the month during the fall and spring semesters. The newspaper's online edition, cm-life.com, contains all of the material published in print, and is updated on an as-needed basis.

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On the cover: Photo illustration by Zoey Lawrence with assets by Mark Hoover and Zoey Morse.

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NEWS

Similar cuts to sheriff departments during 2024

According to the Michigan Association of Counties, roughly 56% of all county budgets in Michigan went to public safety in 2024. Rural counties don't bring in as much taxable income as urban areas, often leading to cuts in the budget or tax increase proposals put out to voters.

In November of 2024, three other counties also lost funding to their sheriff's offices after voters denied their millage proposals:

Jackson County

lost \$615,000 and four deputy positions, including night patrol.

Alpena County

had to reroute \$500,000 to their sheriff's office, and cut two positions.

Eaton County

announced it would reduce its time on the road after the county refinanced its budget.

'It's not an ideal situation'

A year without a county road patrol



CM Life photo | Michael Livingston | File

An Isabella County Sheriff police cruiser sits parked outside the Isabella County Jail at 207 Court St. in this March 2021 file photo. Sheriff's road patrol deputies are not considered mandatory employees in Isabella County and so were eliminated following a November 2024 rejection of a millage proposal.

By **Blace Carpenter**
Managing editor

After the 2024 Election, Isabella County Sheriff Michael Main held on to his tenure as head of the county's public safety. However, his deputies did not return with him.

Voters denied a \$3.7 million millage during the election that would have supported these positions, leaving the Michigan State Police (MSP) to fill the county's absence at the beginning of 2025.

"It's not an ideal situation," Lt. Patrick Agema, the public information officer for MSP's District Six, said. "How we focused on taking the additional responsibility is by pulling the other troopers away from (surrounding) counties and filling that need."

With a hyperfocus on Isabella County, the Mount Pleasant Post responded to 13,638 calls since last January,

nearly double the calls they responded to in 2024 (6,950), according to Isabella County dispatch data.

Despite the increase in calls, the Post didn't expand its staff of 24 due to budget constraints.

"You have breaking and entering, accidents and thefts that are not decreasing," Agema said. "Maintaining the fast-paced workload with the increased number of complaints ... it wears on an officer going from complaint to complaint to complaint."

Main said that an increase in response times is always a concern when agencies are limited.

"We're all short, they're all working very hard," Main said. "When you take, 20 law enforcement officers off the streets that were doing a lot of work, it's going to impact it."

The Post was also forced to move some officers from specialty teams to make up for the road patrol.

In September of 2024, the Sheriff's Office started an investigation after a construction worker was killed during

a 2025 Ford Bronco test drive. The investigation took over a year to be submitted to the county prosecutor's office after being given to MSP.

"I had staff that could perform this type of work, but when they were laid off, all of those specially trained members in a variety of assignments were lost," Main wrote in an email to WCMU Public Media in April. "We now have to obtain that support from other sources, MSP in this matter."

'It's a team effort'

Agema stated that local agencies, such as the Mount Pleasant Police Department, have been crucial in helping fill in for the road patrol over the past year.

"It's not all falling on MSP ... the city's filling in, (Central Michigan University Police) is filling in. There are others that are doing their part as well," he said.

However, after years of having jurisdiction at the county level, these agencies were not redeputized by Main. He said that he ended the tradition due to legal and liability concerns.

One result of the limited deputization is that CMUPD is no longer able to serve students outside of the city limits without MSP's help. CARES Reports are forms that are created whenever a student is showing concerning and possibly dangerous signs of struggling.

"There may be times where we pass it to MSP, and they handle it themselves," CMUPD Chief Deputy Mike Morrow said. "There may be times where we partner with them to assist and help in the investigation."

Main said that partnering with the agencies is better than risking legal trouble.

"It is an extra step, but it's nothing more than, 'Hey, officer so-and-so, I got to follow up over here,'" Main said. "At this point in time, we just don't have the ability to be in the know enough to be comfortable with just opening up deputizations."

Main said that most counties don't give out blanket deputizations

Agema stated that having open communication is crucial to maintaining safety in the county.

"It's a team effort out here," he said. "It's not just one person or one organization that is responsible for everything."

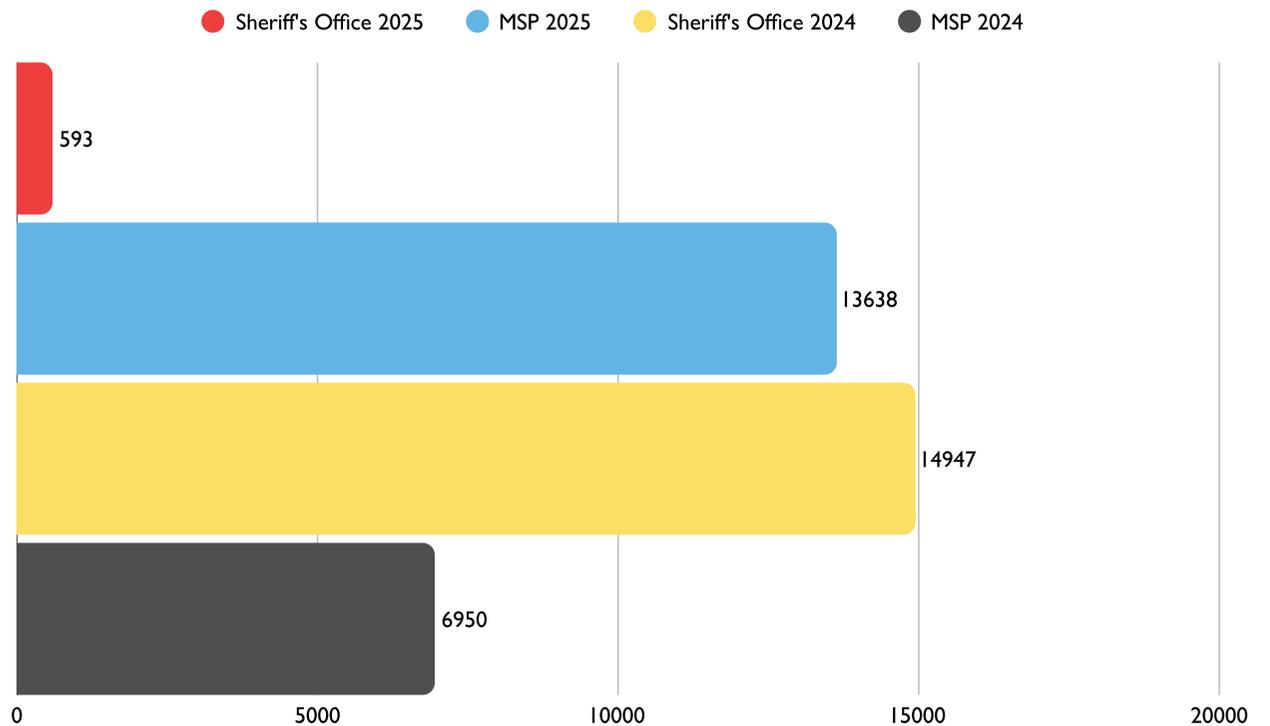
The 'subjective' county funding for public safety

According to Michigan law, the funding for the number of officers in a road patrol is determined by the county board of commissioners, and this subjective level of service makes deputies more susceptible to being cut.

"There's an obligation to fund at a serviceable level, but defining serviceable level is the subjective interpretation," said the deputy director of the Michigan Sheriff Association, Daniel Pfannes. "There is no mandate that funds at a level that would provide for five, 10, 15 or 20 officers."

The law doesn't define the minimum or maximum number of officers required to serve, but whether it's employing 20 officers or cutting down a department to

Isabella County Calls for Service



Source: Isabella County Central Dispatch

Paige Jackowski | Junior designer

just its sheriff and undersheriff, these inconsistencies in staffing can have an impact on the region's public safety.

This precedent was set by the 1976 case, Brownstown Twp. vs. Wayne County. It is still the precedent today.

In that case, Brownstown, Canton, Huron and many other surrounding townships in the Detroit area sued Wayne County after the board of commissioners reduced the size of the county's road patrol, but officials found there was no requirement listed in the state law to have one.

"Our review of the authorities leads us to hold that neither the common law nor Michigan statutory authority imposes a duty on the sheriff to supply a full-time road patrol on all county roads and highways," the court report states.

Jackson County Sheriff Gary Schuette says this law is flawed. His department has faced many cuts over the past few years due to failed millage proposals.

"I think there's a good argument to be made that we're supposed to have people out on patrol," Schuette said. "Townships that don't have police facilities, that don't have policing, the sheriff is responsible for investigating crime ... How do we do that if we don't have anybody on patrol?"

The county's hopes to rebuild

In October, Isabella County hired two deputies to assist the Sheriff's office. This is the first increase county commissioners approved for Main's budget since having to cut the deputy positions.

Main said it's going to be a slow rebuild and isn't

expecting to have a substantial increase in funding anytime soon.

"I would love over the next few years to potentially build at least a day shift, another four or five deputies," he said. "And then maybe revisit the millage request at a smaller amount to bring on the night shift."

If a millage was to be put on a future ballot, Main said he wants to have clear communication on what the county is asking.

"We've had a lot of people in the community over the last year ask when (the road patrol) is going to come back up," he said. "I think there was a lot of misinformation. A lot of people read things on social media and were really confused about certain things and requirements."

There has been no official decision on creating a future ballot initiative. Main said his goal for 2026 is to complete projects that have been delayed due to limited staffing, connect with the community and continue rebuilding his department.

"I would love to do coffee with a cop, soda with the sheriff or something," he said. "Let's have a good conversation and just continue to build that trust and relationship."

"If we get other funds that come in, just continue to build that road patrol back as much as possible."

Michigan transparency effort stalls in House

State leaders preach transparency while blocking the public's right to know

By **Blace Carpenter**
Managing editor

Michigan and Massachusetts are the only states in which citizens cannot submit a Freedom of Information Act request to collect records from their executive and legislative branches.

For years, both Democrats and Republicans have advocated expanding FOIA to include the two branches of government, but no deal has been reached.

Currently, two bills aiming to expand Michigan's FOIA laws (Senate Bills 1 and 2) are sitting in the House's Governmental Operations Committee awaiting discussion. However, Michigan Speaker of the House Matt Hall stated that he wasn't interested in putting the bills on the agenda.

"We're just not going to do FOIA," Hall told reporters during a Nov. 6 press conference.

Michigan's Democratic-led Senate started 2025 by quickly introducing and passing the bills, with 33 yeas and two nays. After moving off the Senate floor, SB 1 and 2 were read by the House and have remained in committee since January.

"If this were put up for a vote in the house, it would pass," said Sen. Jeremy Moss (D-Bloomfield Township), co-author of the bills. "There's no doubt. It has the votes.

"The question is, why won't the speaker put it up for a vote?"

Hall recently celebrated the passing of two earmark reform bills (Public Acts 32 and 33 of 2025), which require legislators to disclose spending on individual projects before a final budget is put up for a vote. The passing of these bills completes part of Hall's Ethics, Accountability and Transparency (HEAT) plan, which he believes will be more beneficial to the public than expanding FOIA.

"We ask people all the time, they know HEAT will have a much better benefit than FOIA," Hall said during the conference.

Michigan Press Association Public Policy Manager Lisa McGraw said that the reform bill is a step in the right direction, but that the state government could, and



CM Life photo illustration | Blace Carpenter | Managing editor

should, do more.

"I think until the governor and the legislature in the state are subject to FOIA, we really have no transparency at the state level," said McGraw, who has been working to expand FOIA since 2015.

Hall did not respond to requests for comment.

Senators Moss and McBroom's mission for FOIA

SB 1 and 2 are in the same position as other FOIA

expansion bills that have been introduced in recent years.

Since joining the State Senate in 2019, Moss and Sen. Ed McBroom (R-Vulcan) have co-authored four bills in an attempt to expand FOIA:

- Senate Bill 1 of 2025
- Senate Bill 2 of 2025
- Senate Bill 669 of 2023
- Senate Bill 670 of 2023

While serving as the state representative for Michigan's 35th District, Moss introduced House Bill 4149 of 2017, which would have made the legislature

and the governor subject to FOIA. Just like his and McBroom's Senate bills, the House bill was referred to committee and wasn't put on the agenda for a vote.

"It was the first bipartisan package that got out of the House that term, and the Senate Leader (Arlan Meekhof) said, 'I'm not taking this up,'" Moss said.

According to a 2017 story by the Detroit Free Press, Meekhof told journalists, "You guys are the only people who care about this," referencing Moss and McBroom's bill.

Both senators will be term-limited at the end of 2026. Both stated they will continue to push for expanding the public's right to know.

"We would really like to see this project through," Moss said. "It's not fun to work on something for 10 years, and make progress on it, and not get past the finish line. But we're working really, really hard to achieve this."

The campaign on FOIA expansion

In 2018, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer stated that she would work to expand FOIA laws to include the governor's office and legislature.

"I mean, unilaterally we could open up the executive branch to FOIA and ensure that there is real notice and real searchable capabilities online," Whitmer said in an interview on PBS Detroit in July of 2018. "The public and the press need tools so they can get information."

Whitmer signed the earmark reform legislation into law and praised the bills.

"Since I took office, I've been committed to increasing transparency in our government, so Michiganders know exactly where their hard-earned dollars are going," Whitmer stated in a press release. "I made a promise to increase transparency on legislative earmarks in my most recent State of the State. Less than a year later, I'm proud to sign these two bills that require lawmakers to put their names on any projects they propose.

"I'll keep working with anyone to serve Michiganders and increase transparency in our government."

Whitmer made the calendars for her office and that of Lt. Governor Garlin Gilchrist open to the public, as well as her federal income tax returns and personal financial information.

However, her promise to extend FOIA to her office has not yet been met.

Whitmer did not provide a comment for this story.

"Since the (Whitmer) administration started, we have not gone anywhere despite an entire campaign called the Sunshine Report, when she was running the first time," said McGraw.

In 2018, Whitmer released an eight-page document titled "Get it Done: Michigan Sunshine Plan," highlighting issues with Michigan's transparency and ethics laws and what she wanted to change if



Blace Carpenter | Managing editor

The dome of the Michigan State Capitol consist of eight paintings by Italian artist Tommaso Juglaris that represent "priorities" of the state and 110 gold and silver leaf stars.

elected governor.

"If the legislature won't act, I will use the governor's authority under the Michigan State Constitution to extend FOIA to the Lieutenant Governor and Governor's Offices," Whitmer stated in the report. "Michiganders should know when and what their governor is working on."

While discussing the history of politicians advocating for expanding FOIA, Attorney General Dana Nessel told *Central Michigan Life* that false promises are often made during campaigns.

"No one runs for governor being like, 'Absolutely not, I don't agree with that,'" Nessel said. "Everyone says what they think everyone wants to hear, and maybe they really think that, until they get (into office)."

As Whitmer's term comes to an end in 2026, candidates in the gubernatorial race have started to make promises on expanding FOIA.

"On day one, I will voluntarily comply with FOIA," said Democratic candidate Jocelyn Benson, who has

served as Secretary of State since 2019. "Every job I've had, whether it's been running a law school or running the Department of State, I've complied with FOIA proudly."

Republican candidate and Former House Speaker Tom Leonard shared a similar commitment during an interview with *Central Michigan Life* in October.

"Michigan is only one of two states in the entire country whose executive branch and Legislature are not subject to open records and FOIA. That needs to change," Leonard said. "People of this state deserve to know what's going on in their executive branch and Legislature."

Editor's note: This story was produced by the Michigan Press Association. Blace Carpenter, Central Michigan Life managing editor, was an MPA fellow in 2025.

Local property dispute heads to Supreme Court

By Ethan Wallace
Staff reporter

A former Isabella County homeowner is suing the county over a foreclosure that he says violated his family's Fifth and Eighth Amendment rights. Now, it's up to the U.S. Supreme Court to decide whether Marc Pung was excessively penalized when the county seized his property and sold it in a foreclosure auction.

The Supreme Court is scheduled to discuss the Michael Pung v. Isabella County case on Feb. 25, 2026. The plaintiff, Michael Pung, is claiming that a property was repossessed and the sale took place because of taxes that were unpaid, but not owed. The court will determine whether the county violated homeowner Marc Pung's Fifth or Eighth Amendment rights.

Michael Pung, the named plaintiff and executor of the estate, is Marc Pung's uncle and the brother of the late Timothy Scott Pung, who first purchased the property in question on St. Andrews Drive.

When Timothy Scott Pung bought the home in Union Township for \$125,000, he claimed Principal Residence Exemption (PRE). The exemption allows Michigan property owners to opt out of certain property taxes if they live there.

His son, Marc Pung, was a partial owner and resident of the property in 2008, when the dispute began.

During the 2007 to 2011 tax years, Patricia DePriest, the Union Township Tax Assessor, denied the PRE credit for the property. This is according to the court documents written by Pung's attorney Philip Lee Ellison.

According to the court filing, DePriest revoked the PRE — commonly known as a homestead exemption. She allegedly denied the exemption because there was no new affidavit of Timothy Scott Pung's heirs on file.

"This led to a \$2,241.93 unpaid tax bill for a tax that was never actually owed," according to the petition.

The Pung family refused to pay the additional tax and claimed that the estate was entitled to the exemption. The county, meanwhile, filed a lien against the parcel to start the foreclosure process. Michael Pung took the issue to the Michigan Tax Tribunal.

The tribunal ordered the PRE credit to be fully restored because Marc Pung was a part-owner of the estate. The ruling found Marc Pung was not a new owner and did not need to file a new affidavit.

"Michigan courts ultimately authorized the foreclosure over Pung's strenuous objections and challenges, because DePriest failed to provide timely notice of the 2012 revocation and Michigan's various



A house sits in the snow at 3176 Andrews Drive, in Mount Pleasant, on Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2025. The building is currently in the midst of a house dispute involving the Supreme Court.

Mark Hoover | Visuals editor

tribunals found themselves powerless to fix the error," according to the petition.

Isabella County initiated foreclosure of the property because of the unpaid-but-not-owed tax bill. The house sold at auction for \$76,008, according to the lawsuit.

"From Isabella County's own annual property valuation determination, the Pung property was worth \$194,400 at the time of foreclosure," the petition read.

The lawsuit alleges violations of the Fifth Amendment for unconstitutionally seizing the property without compensation or the Eighth Amendment for unconstitutionally giving an excessive fine.

A public relations representative for the county did not return calls for comment. Isabella County Commissioner Frank Engler noted that the case has been through the state appellate process, and is now slated to be heard by the High Court.

"It has been through the process and so far they've been citing the county's position about what the value is," he said. "Then you have to determine who owns the

land, if it goes into bankruptcy.

"I'm a farmer and I always said 'We've had our property since 1880. We don't own it, we just lease it from the government because we don't pay our (exempted) taxes.'"

The Pung family alleges about \$118,000 loss in equity from the sale and levied-but-unowed taxes. They claim the land was taken without just compensation.

Isabella County, in its response, claimed that the foreclosure and tax auction already happened. The foreclosure collects the unpaid PRE tax, and the foreclosure sale does not equal what the former owner believes the property was worth.

The county's argument claims that: "The fair-market-value theory would require the government to pay out more than it receives at auction, benefitting delinquent taxpayers to the detriment of their fellow citizens who pay their taxes on time."

Ellison said the Supreme Court is expected to hear oral arguments in February or March.

Path to a higher degree

By Elizabeth Sadecki
Staff reporter

Lansing Community College students now have a pathway to earn a four-year degree faster, and with fewer roadblocks.

Central Michigan University partnered with LCC to create a new co-enrollment, dual-admission program called Central Bound. Kaleb Patrick, the interim vice president of Innovation and Online at CMU, said Central Bound will help create an easier path for LCC students to earn a bachelor's degree.

"What we want to be able to do is help those students achieve their goals by eliminating a bunch of those unknown questions and a bunch of administrative red tape that they potentially experience otherwise," Patrick said.

Nationally, he said 80% of students who attend a community college indicate they want to pursue a four-year bachelor's degree. But roughly 18% complete one.

Patrick attributes that difference to misunderstandings about the difference in universities' requirements. This partnership ensures students are taking the correct classes that will count towards their bachelor's degree.

"Now, whether the individual is talking to somebody from CMU or they're talking to somebody from LCC, the information they're getting is up to date, and it's accurate," Patrick said.

With Central Bound, students are enrolled at both institutions, allowing

them access to academic support and advising from both schools. Patrick said this collaboration eliminates room for possible errors because they're not technically transferring.

Central Bound students have access to LCC and CMU online and on-campus classes. They may also apply through either school.

"We help break down any of those barriers that historically existed, so that we can create as meaningful and effective of an educational experience as possible for those students," Patrick said.

LCC Provost Sally Welch said partnerships allowing students to be both community college and four-year institution students aren't common in the country. According to Patrick and Welch, CMU and LCC administrators and faculty worked closely to create transfer guides and articulation agreements based on the program.

"We have called this opportunity with Lansing Community College a prototype of how we can do this with other institutions moving forward," Patrick said.

The LCC partnership was funded by a grant from the Michigan Center for Adult College Success. With a desire to partner with more community colleges in the future, Patrick said CMU pursued another grant to help with the costs of expanding.

Patrick said it's still not certain how other programs could be phased into the program, should CMU receive that money. He said decisions about what community colleges would be added to Central Bound would be made by the provost's office, Student Recruitment and Retention and Student and Academic Affairs.

"It's a big deal to have a dualadmission program," Welch said. "And there's a lot of behind-the-scenes work that has to be done to make it very smooth for the students."

“What we want to be able to do is help those students achieve their goals.”

—Kaleb Patrick, interim vice president of Innovation and Online

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OPINION

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— *The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States*

YOUR TURN

We welcome letters to the editor and guest columns. All submissions columns must include a name, address, organization university affiliation (if any) and phone number for verification. Anonymous letters will not be printed. *Central Michigan Life* reserves the right to edit all letters and columns for style, length, libel, redundancy, clarity, civility and accuracy. Letters should be no more than 450 words in length. Longer guest columns must remain under 750 words. CM Life reserves the right to print any original content as a letter or guest column. Submission does not guarantee publication.

Editorial: Newsroom resolutions



Mark Hoover | Visuals editor

The 2026 *Central Michigan Life* leadership team poses for a group photo inside the CM Life office in Moore Hall, on Monday, Jan. 12, 2026.

Now continues to rest on the academic buildings, as professors introduce syllabi and Mount Pleasant restaurants open doors to large friend groups. It means the new semester is finally here.

Returning from holiday celebrations at home, we're ready to see what 2026 holds for us.

The United States stands in front of the midterm election year, and the globe faces political turmoil in many places.

On the local level, for this print edition, *Central Michigan Life* checked on how the sheriff's department is doing after it lost funding and deputies.

While 2025 was certainly a year of change for the university and the country, CM Life has been embracing some changes, too.

For example, we created a multimedia editor position, who is now responsible for the video and social media content. Our goal is to meet our audience where they are and to create engaging journalism.

In addition, just like any semester, we're rebuilding the staff as students graduate. While losing institutional knowledge is hard, we're excited to see what new ideas and perspectives upcoming CM Life staff members will bring.

As we wrap up our reflection of the past year, we are eager to see what 2026 brings for us. For CM Life, the editorial team has certain goals.

Masha Smahliuk-Bootz, the editor-in-chief: My New Year's resolution for CM Life is to continue

serving the CMU and Mount Pleasant communities and producing high-quality journalism that would be recognized by the National Pacemaker award, again. I also hope CM Life continues to be a home for all of our staff members, so that they all feel welcome and feel like they are safe to learn and grow here.

Sydney Neal, the sports editor: My New Year's resolution for CM Life is for all of our reporters, along with the editorial staff, to experience stepping out of our comfort zones. Further, I hope that we can continue to be the storytellers of people who may not have a voice while also taking care of ourselves first.

Zoey Morse, the assistant photo editor: My New Year's resolution for CM Life is to get closer to my peers, other editors and my desk in the newsroom. I also want our staff to continue excelling at delivering the Mount Pleasant community news they can't get from most other places.

Grace Walker, the news editor: My New Year's resolution for CM Life is to keep telling the stories that matter in our community, and continue asking the difficult questions that hold our officials accountable.

Blace Carpenter, the managing editor: My New Year's resolution is to continue being a watchdog for our community and bringing news that keeps readers informed about the ever-changing life around us.

Winter Wonderland

As Central Michigan students were away for winter break, the campus stayed much of the same. With winterberry fruit budding, squirrels foraging and icicles forming, winter was in full effect on Central Michigan's campus. Visuals Editor Mark Hoover captured the sight of Central's snow-covered campus.



Mark Hoover | Visuals editor

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SUN 18 • Gymnastics vs Western Michigan
2 p.m., ESPN +

TUE 20 • Men's Basketball vs Ball State
7 p.m., ESPN +

'A game of musical chairs'



Mark Hoover | Visuals editor

Senior defensive back Brenden Deasfernandes celebrates a solo pass breakup at Kelly/Shorts Stadium on Saturday, Sept. 27, 2025. Deasfernandes finished the game with one solo tackle and one defended pass.

By Sydney Neal
Sports editor

The locker room was quiet weeks before the season officially ended.

Long after the final whistle echoed through Ford Field, Central Michigan football players could be seen giving autographs, while others took their final moments as a Chippewa. Despite the 34-7 loss to Northwestern, CMU football wasn't stuck in disappointment — it was focused on reflection.

"This is just a preview of what it can be," linebacker Jordan Kwiatkowski said.

For the football program, the 2025 season wasn't defined by a bowl loss. It was defined by belief. Belief that was built through seven wins, a return to postseason football and a locker room that bought into a new standard under first-year head coach Matt Drinkall.

"Looking back a year ago when we didn't even know where this thing was going to go," Kwiatkowski said. "You just really reflect and you just got to be grateful."

In the days following the bowl game, the Chippewas entered one of the most emotional and uncertain stretches of its year. The transfer portal opened, NFL Draft declarations followed and exit interviews began. A roster that had grown together for months began to shift.

"The landscape of college football right now is so

different," Drinkall said. "You're playing in games where there might be kids that play today that meet with me tomorrow and say, 'I'm going somewhere else.'"

Movement across the roster

That reality hit almost immediately.

Several Chippewas entered the transfer portal the days after the season ended, creating change across multiple position groups. In the secondary, defensive backs Kalen Carroll and Brenden Deasfernandes moved on after playing key roles in a defense that improved as the season progressed.

Carroll, who was previously at Cincinnati, has now committed to TCU with one year of eligibility left. Deasfernandes who was previously at Iowa prior to CMU, transferred to bowl-game opponent, Northwestern.

"Something I've done personally for the rest of the team is trying to be empathetic for the rest of the team and allow them to put themselves in my shoes, and allow me to put myself in their shoes so they can understand when I say you don't have a lot of time left," Deasfernandes said. "This is exactly what the feeling is and this is the meaning of it."

Tight end DeCorion Temple, who spent the last four seasons with the Chippewas, found a new home at Oregon State. Running back Trey Cornist, the previous transfer from Tulane, committed to UConn after seeing some

action alongside Nahree Biggins throughout the season.

The movement extended throughout the locker room. Offensive linemen Jacob Saurbeck, Ryan Blum and Dane Sickler entered the portal, as Central Michigan prepares to reshuffle its protection unit.

Wide receivers Tyson Davis and Langston Lewis, both veterans on the team, also entered the transfer portal. As of Jan. 6, Lewis has since removed his name from the portal via an Instagram announcement.

On the defensive line, Keshawn Hayden and Kade Kostus both entered the portal but are uncommitted as of Jan 14.

On paper, the list feels long. In reality, it reflects today's game.

"It's really kind of a game of musical chairs," Drinkall said. "We've created an environment and a product now that a lot of people want to be a part of. So more people, I think, are going to want to stay."

For some players, the portal offered a clearer path to playing time. For others, it offered a new role or system. For the program, it means responding quickly — balancing roster needs while protecting the culture built over the season.

"There'll be all new kinds of challenges when you win seven games and go to a bowl," Drinkall said. "Our kids are awesome. I love our players. They play their absolute tails off, and I think one of the things that makes our team so unique and so fun to be around is we talk all the time about being willing to do things that others are unwilling to do."

A different kind of goodbye

While the transfer portal creates one door, the NFL Draft declarations represent a different one.

Seven of CMU's veterans declared for the NFL Draft: linebacker Jordan Kwiatkowski, quarterback Joe Labas, running back Nahree Biggins, safety Elijah Rikard, defensive lineman Dylan Fisher, defensive lineman Johnathan Decker and defensive lineman Michael Heldman. Their decisions officially closed the chapter on a senior class that helped steady the program during a major transition.

When Drinkall arrived in Mount Pleasant, there were no guarantees. The roster could have emptied overnight. Instead, the senior leaders stayed.

"If these guys leave, it's over," Drinkall said. "Everybody leaves with these guys."

Kwiatkowski became one of the emotional anchors of the defense — a vocal leader whose toughness set the tone each week. Finishing with 117 total tackles and three sacks this season, Kwiatkowski leaves behind a legacy that he wants continued.

Alongside him was Heldman, who has been a part of the team since 2021. In this year alone, he had 48 total tackles and 10.5 sacks for 48 yards.

"Now we look forward to what the Central Michigan team is going to be, and the one thing we did as seniors I think is a really good job is internally(...)we led these guys in a way," Heldman said. "There were a lot of young guys. We led these guys in a way that they started to follow along. We had a certain attitude when it came to playing

football. Coach Drinkall brought a lot of that philosophy in and guys started to form to just the philosophy we had as a senior class but also a philosophy he had."

Navigating what comes next

CMU now faces the challenge of replacing production, leadership and experience while holding onto the identity that fueled its turnaround under Drinkall.

"We'll recruit as hard as anyone in America," Drinkall said. "The timeline is the hardest part."

Unlike a year ago, the program isn't set on a rebuild but an uprising of new possibilities.

"I think there's enough of a body of work now where when I say it, it's not a leap of faith," Drinkall said. "Now there's enough evidence where everybody's looking for the same things at the same time and we now know kind of like which way to go together."

Younger players will be asked to step into bigger roles sooner than expected. New faces will arrive through the portal. Expectations will rise — inside the locker room and beyond it.

"(This is) one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever been through in my life. It's one of those things that was really neat because I came from West Point where I wasn't the head coach...to where I come into this environment where now I am the head coach," Drinkall said. "I really lean heavily on these guys' leadership for advice...and the coolest part was the team did such a great job this year because our most talented, productive players are our hardest working and best people."

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Chaos in the Motor City

By David Powell
Sports reporter

Although the 2025 Central Michigan football season's ending wasn't ideal in the eyes of its players, the season as a whole is something to celebrate.

"It was so cool to see the entire stadium filled with Central Michigan fans," head coach Matt Drinkall said. "The word I've used is 'renewed'. It looks like there's a renewed spark and interest with our fan base, with our alumni, with our players, with the state. ... I know (the bowl game) did not go the way we wanted it to, but there are things trending in the right direction."

Despite being projected at the bottom of the Mid-American Conference prior to the season's start, Drinkall wanted to prove those odds wrong.

"For our kids today, if you'd have told us a year ago... to knock out seven wins and get to be playing after Christmas in a bowl game in Ford Field is a pretty good situation," Drinkall said.

After losing 21 seniors along with its head coach in the 2024 season, a rebuild was on the horizon for CMU.

Gaining a number of transfers and convincing many players to stay after entering the portal, Drinkall played the cards he was dealt.

The Chippewas clinched their 16th postseason berth and first bowl game since 2021 with a 7-5 overall record and a 5-3 MAC record. The matchup against Big Ten opponent Northwestern came just 27 days after the end of the regular season.

"Just give Northwestern a ton of credit," Drinkall said. "Those guys did an unbelievable job today. They have a first-class team and program and organization. I thought they played a really, really good football game today."

After missing bowl eligibility last season, Northwestern came into the game after a regular season that ended with a 6-6 record and a 4-5 record in Big Ten conference play to earn a bid.

The first quarter was a defensive slugfest on both sides of the ball. From the first play from scrimmage, Central Michigan's defensive unit made its presence felt. A stop on fourth-and-one by the Chippewas, led by linebacker Jordan Kwiatkowski, set up the offense with excellent field position at the Wildcat's 33-yard line.

Northwestern's defense, however, began the game



Trevor Sparks | Staff photographer

Central Michigan defensive players celebrate a fourth-down stop against Northwestern at Ford Field in Detroit, on Friday, Dec. 26, 2025.

strong as well. A sack on third down from the Wildcat defense kept Central Michigan out of the end zone, and a missed field goal from kicker Cade Graham left the game tied at zero at the end of five minutes.

Both teams traded blows for the rest of the first quarter without finding any points. Neither team's offense was able to move the ball downfield more than 15 yards in a

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drive, hindered by sacks. At the end of the first quarter, Northwestern had gotten to the quarterback twice and Central once.

At the 8:01 mark of the second quarter, Northwestern came up with a huge interception, picking off quarterback Angel Flores, who was in his first game back from an injury that had sidelined him since the end of October.

Set up on the CMU 29-yard line, the Wildcats only needed three plays to find the end zone. As a pass from quarterback Preston Stone found its target, wide receiver Griffin Wilde, Northwestern was able to put up the first points of the game.

On the first play of Central's next drive, Northwestern's defense forced another turnover. This time, quarterback Joe Labas was sacked, and the ball was knocked out of his hands and jumped on by a Wildcat at the CMU 18-yard line. Northwestern again converted on the good field position, this time with a rushing touchdown from running back Caleb Komolafe.

With 3:38 left in the half, Central Michigan needed something to go right on offense to avoid going into the break down big. Instead, yet another fumble on the first play of the drive by Labas allowed Northwestern to tack on seven more, ballooning the lead to 21-0 at halftime.

Central Michigan's turnover problems continued into the second half. Just five plays into the third quarter, Flores fumbled the ball for his second turnover of the

game. Northwestern picked up the ball and returned it to the end zone for a scoop-and-score, increasing the lead to 27-0.

The Wildcats added another touchdown with 2:31 left in the third quarter, and the defense continued to suffocate the Chippewas, who were still scoreless at the start of the fourth.

Central Michigan finally broke through with 6:11 left in the game, courtesy of a touchdown pass from Labas to running back Brock Townsend. Central Michigan added an interception from cornerback Kalen Carroll in the fourth, but it was too late.

Central Michigan finished the game having committed four total turnovers. Before Saturday, the Chippewas had only given the ball up a total of 12 times over the season.

"They didn't do one single thing that we didn't prepare for, and we had good practice," Drinkall said. "We just didn't execute really well. We talk about that all the time, how important that is. It was frustrating to watch it go that way outside of those four snaps because the rest of the time we played really hard and played really well."

Offensively, Labas finished with 178 passing yards. Running back Trey Cornist led the team in rushing yards with 66. The wide receiver room was led by Langston Lewis, who finished with 83 yards.

Kwiatkowski, a senior, who played his final game as a Chippewa, reflected after the game about what this



Mark Hoover | Visual editor

Central Michigan redshirt senior linebacker Dakota Cochran tackles Northwestern redshirt sophomore wide receiver Rickey Ahumaraeze during the GameAbove Sports Bowl between Central Michigan University and Northwestern University at Ford Field in Detroit, on Friday, Dec. 26, 2025. Cochran had five tackles in the game.

season has meant to him and his hopes for the future of the program.

"Looking back a year ago when we didn't even know where this thing was gonna go, and you just really reflect, you just gotta be grateful," Kwiatkowski said. "A lot of outsiders, they doubted us. They weren't even expecting us to win five games. So, for us to do this with these seniors and then these guys, and help Coach Drinkall and the staff and this university get a good kickstart at the future of this program, there's nothing better."

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