PHELPS COUNTY
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

# IMPACT REPORT

## 2026 Update

*Prepared by the Phelps County Community Foundation*




*This edition has been rewritten for plain-language readability and shortened for easier reading*

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# LETTER FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

Dear Phelps County Residents,

Thank you for reading the 2026 Community Impact Report. Our volunteer committee spent the past year gathering data and talking with local leaders. They looked at what is going well and what still needs work.

We do not just want to share numbers. We want to start good conversations. We want to help our community make smart choices together. In the pages ahead, you will find real progress worth celebrating. You will also find challenges that need our attention.

Thank you to every committee member, partner, and resident who helped with this report.

Sincerely,
*Ben Tipton*

Board President,
Phelps County Community Foundation



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The 2026 Impact Report tracks how Phelps County is doing in six areas:*

Business and Economic Development, Community Health, Early Childhood, Housing, Public Safety, and Transportation. Each area gets one of three ratings.



**BLUE RIBBON**
Real Strength



**CAUTION**
Means Mixed Results Or A Concern To Watch



**RED FLAG**
A Serious Problem That Needs Attention Now

This year brought real wins. Fewer residents are uninsured. Opioid deaths dropped by nearly three-quarters. More homes are for sale than in 2023. At the same time, new concerns emerged. Unemployment is rising, and Phelps County now meets the definition of a child care desert. The county's response — a new Early Childhood Center opening this fall — is one of the biggest stories in this report.

*The pages that follow explain the data behind each rating, section by section.*

# COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

*Key numbers from across this report:*

### POPULATION
approximately 45,672

### EMPLOYMENT
more than 20,000 jobs, filled and open positions combined

### UNEMPLOYMENT
approximately 4.6%

### POVERTY RATE
17.2% (child poverty rate: 21.2%)

### MEDIAN HOME SALES PRICE
$242,500

### CHILD CARE SHORTAGE
more than 600 infant and toddler slots needed



# COMMUNITY PROGRESS DASHBOARD

*A one-glance comparison of the 2024 inaugural report to this 2026 update. Every rating in this report uses the same three-color scale shown here.*

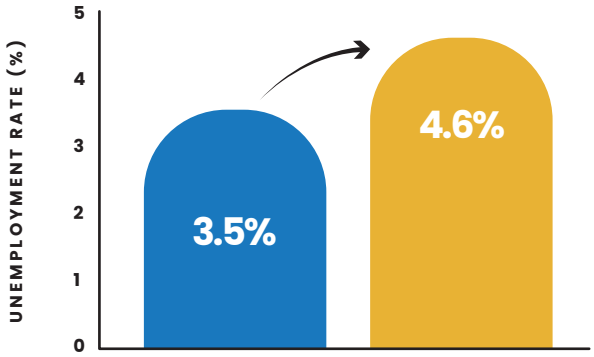
| FOCUS AREA | 2024 | 2026 | WHAT'S DRIVING IT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Business & Economic Development | BLUE RIBBON | CAUTION | *Unemployment rose from 3.5% to 4.6%; sales tax growth has slowed for three straight years.* |
| Community Health | CAUTION | CAUTION | *Uninsured rate nearly cut in half (14% to 8.8%), but poverty and doctor shortages remain.* |
| Early Childhood | BLUE RIBBON | CAUTION | *Now a child care desert, but a new Early Childhood Center adds 360 seats this fall.* |
| Housing | RED FLAG | CAUTION | *More homes for sale and less homelessness, but construction and affordability still lag.* |
| Public Safety | CAUTION | CAUTION | *A 73% decline in opioid-related deaths, domestic violence cases are increasing, placing greater pressure on service providers already facing staffing and funding shortages.* |
| Transportation | CAUTION | CAUTION | *Traffic deaths are declining, but funding and transit gaps remain unresolved.* |

CAUTION

# BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This section compares jobs, wages, and population in Phelps County to the rest of Missouri. Overall, the local economy is showing early signs of strain. Unemployment rose, and sales tax growth has slowed for three years in a row.

Population growth has slowed since 2022. Jobs grew from about 17,000 in 2020 to over 19,000 in 2024, led by manufacturing and health care. But wages here still trail the state, and unemployment climbed from 3.5% in 2023 to 4.6% in 2025.




INCREASE OF
**1.1**
PERCENTAGE POINTS
FROM 2023 -2025

## BLUE RIBBON

- The cost of living here is about 20% below the national average, which helps residents and draws new businesses.
- Missouri S&T continues to grow, supported by ongoing investment from the Kummer Institute.
- Phelps Health continues to expand emergency and trauma care along the I-44 corridor.

## CAUTION

- Housing is harder to afford than it used to be, with limited new construction and an aging supply of homes.
- Fort Leonard Wood's future health care decisions could shift patients and jobs in the region.
- The county still needs to finish broadband and industrial site work to compete for advanced manufacturing.

## RED FLAG

- Local wages lag the state by about 21%. This makes it harder to recruit and keep skilled workers, though it also means lower costs for employers.
- Employers report ongoing trouble filling nursing, skilled trade, and health care jobs.
- Sales tax growth has slowed sharply: from 5.85% in 2023, to 2.45% in 2024, to about 2.2% so far in 2025.

# COMMUNITY HEALTH

Community health works best when hospitals, clinics, and local groups work together. Phelps County has strong partnerships, but poverty and provider shortages still limit access to care for many residents.

### BLUE RIBBON

- The ToRCH program helps Phelps Health and community partners coordinate care and catch health problems earlier, which should reduce costly emergency room visits over time.
- The Delbert Day Cancer Institute offers full cancer care in one place, so patients no longer need to travel for treatment. It is affiliated with the respected Siteman Cancer Network in St. Louis.

### CAUTION

- The uninsured rate dropped sharply, from about 14% to 8.8% of residents — real progress. Still, that rate remains higher than both the Missouri and national averages, so continued attention is needed.

### RED FLAG

- About 17% of Phelps County residents live below the poverty line, compared to about 12.6% statewide. Poverty makes it harder to afford care, healthy food, and insurance.
- Phelps County has too few doctors: federal data shows a shortage of about 3.4 full-time providers, meaning longer waits and more difficulty getting timely care.

## PREVENTIVE CARE AND HEALTH LITERACY

Fewer than half of children on Medicaid in Phelps County had a dental or preventive medical visit in the past year, compared to roughly 80% of children nationwide. Low use of preventive care can have several causes. These include health literacy, but also transportation, provider availability, and appointment times that conflict with work schedules. When children miss preventive visits, small health problems often turn into bigger, costlier ones handled later in an emergency room. Improving access will likely require addressing more than one of these barriers at once.





CAUTION

# EARLY CHILDHOOD

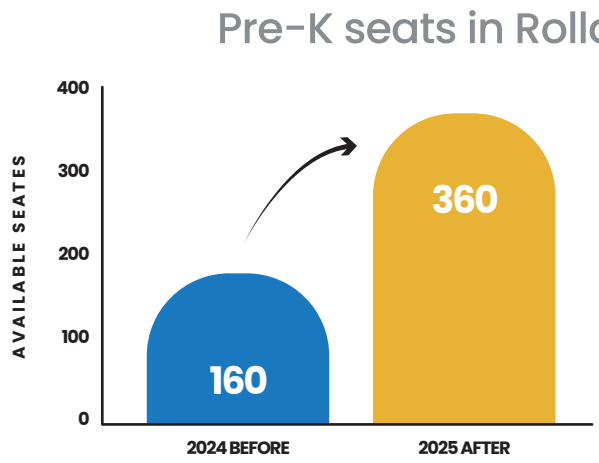
The first years of a child's life shape everything that follows. Quality early care and learning build the foundation for school success, healthy relationships, and a strong local workforce down the road. This section carries a Caution rating, and that rating reflects two things happening at once. Phelps County now meets the state definition of a child care desert, which is a serious concern. At the same time, the county has responded with the largest expansion of early childhood capacity in its history. Both things are true, and both matter.

## THE CONCERN: A CHILD CARE DESERT

Child Care Aware of Missouri defines a child care desert as an area where there are more than three times as many young children as licensed child care slots. Phelps County now fits that definition. A 2024 community survey found that families need more than 600 additional infant and toddler slots to meet demand. About 21% of children in Phelps County live in poverty, compared to about 17% statewide, which makes reliable, affordable child care even more essential for working families.

## THE RESPONSE: A NEW EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

In Fall 2026, Rolla Public Schools will open a new Early Childhood Center that roughly doubles the county's pre-K capacity, from about 160 seats to 360 seats.




**+200 SEATS**

**125% INCREASE**

CAUTION

*The new center goes beyond simply adding seats:*

**Full-Day Programming**

- Full-day programming, replacing a more limited half-day schedule that made it hard for working parents to hold a job.

**Transportation Provided**

- Transportation, removing a barrier that has kept some families from enrolling.

**Health & Dental Clinic On-Site**

- An on-site medical and dental clinic, run by Four Rivers Community Health Center, allowing children to receive basic care without leaving campus.



CAUTION

- Only seven seats in Phelps County are funded through the state's Child Care Works program this year, far short of demand.
- Child care remains expensive: local families spend 15% or more of their income on care, well above the 7% the federal government considers affordable.

## WHY THIS IS A CAUTION, NOT A RED FLAG

The underlying shortage is real and still needs attention. But substantial new capacity, full-day scheduling, transportation, and health services, are now in place to address it. That combination of ongoing challenge and meaningful new response is what a Caution rating is meant to capture.

CAUTION

# HOUSING

Phelps County's housing market is healing, but it is not healed. More homes are for sale, and homelessness is down, yet new construction and affordability remain real concerns.

### BLUE RIBBON

- Homes for sale are up 90% since 2023, giving buyers more choices than they have had in years.
- Homelessness in the Rolla Mission's service area dropped 29% since 2023, with fewer people needing shelter each night.

### CAUTION

- The median home price is now $242,500, up 13% since 2023 — good for sellers, harder on first-time buyers.
- Homes are staying on the market longer, an average of 56 days, giving buyers more time to decide but signaling a cooling pace of sales.

### RED FLAG

- New home construction has not kept pace: building permits are down 18% since 2023.
- Rental vacancy remains extremely tight at 1-2%, meaning renters have very few open units to choose from.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

- Buying a home: you have more options, but prices are rising.
- Renting: plan ahead — vacancy is tight.
- Building or developing housing: opportunities exist, especially for affordable units.

*As Mike Woessner, a local housing expert, put it: "The housing shortage began in 2008 during the great recession… this never came back to the level needed to support the area."*



CAUTION

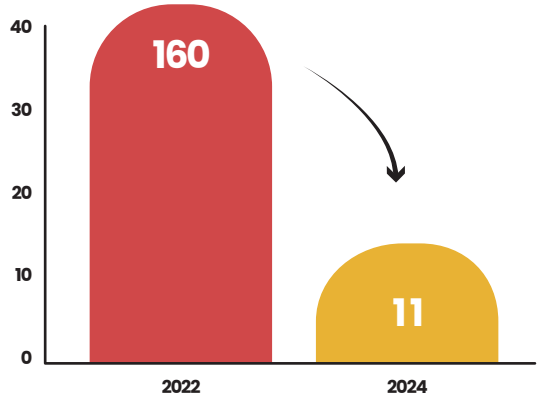
# PUBLIC SAFETY

Phelps County's public safety agencies work closely together, and that teamwork is paying off. Overdose deaths are falling, and emergency response is well coordinated. At the same time, staffing shortages and rising need at local support services deserve real attention.

## BLUE RIBBON

- Phelps County's 911 dispatch center serves 15 agencies from one location, speeding up response times countywide.

Opioid Overdose Deaths -73% Down




- Opioid overdose deaths fell 73% since 2022, dropping from 41 deaths to 11. Wider access to Narcan is a major reason why.
- Russell House offers free, confidential help to survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking, 24 hours a day, every day. Its shelter, crisis line, and legal help are a strong response to a serious problem.

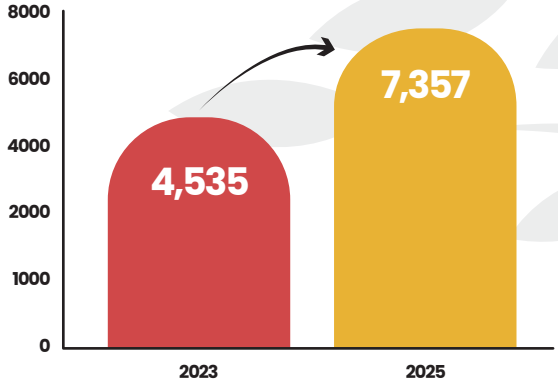
## CAUTION

- Police and fire agencies still struggle to recruit and keep staff. New training partnerships with Missouri S&T and East Central Community College are a promising start.

## RED FLAG

- Reports of domestic and sexual violence are increasing in Phelps County, leading to greater demand for shelter, advocacy, and victim services.

Russell House Shelter Nights -upto 62%




- Russell House provided 7,357 shelter nights in 2025, up 62% from 4,535 in 2023. Survivors are staying longer because safe, affordable housing is hard to find.
- Hospital visits by Russell House advocates rose 27% in the past year, from 34 to 43.
- New drug threats are emerging even as opioid deaths fall: heroin, synthetic drugs marketed to youth, and vaping among teens.
- Suicide deaths are rising and need more attention across agencies.
- Law enforcement is short by about 17.5 positions countywide. Most local fire departments are still all-volunteer, covering wide rural areas with thin staffing.
- Many public safety programs depend on grants that could expire, putting future funding at risk.

# TRANSPORTATION

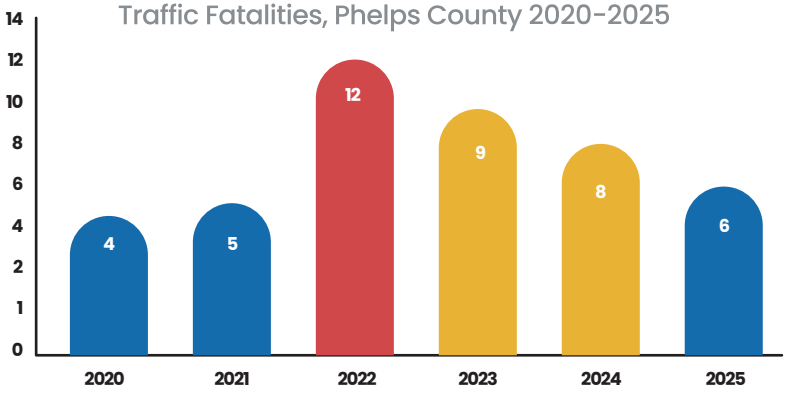
Phelps County sits at the crossroads of Interstate 44 and Highway 63, a real economic advantage. Traffic deaths are trending down, but funding, transit options, and bridge conditions still need work.

## BLUE RIBBON

- The I-44 and Highway 63 interchange connects Phelps County to the rest of the region and supports local business.
- The Transportation Development District has funded real local improvements, including a new road connecting Highway 72 to I-44.
- SMTS now offers a public bus route around Rolla, giving residents without a car a way to reach jobs, stores, and the hospital.

## CAUTION

- Traffic fatalities are down, from 12 in 2022 to 6 in 2025 — real progress. Still, one death is one too many, and speeding played a role in 31 of the 44 fatal crashes between 2020 and 2025.




- Total crashes fell slightly, from 35 in 2022 to 33 in 2024, a drop of about 6%. But within that total, injury crashes rose 25% and fatal crashes doubled — meaning the crashes that did happen were more severe.

## RED FLAG

- Transportation funding remains inconsistent. Federal pandemic relief dollars that once boosted transit funding have now been spent, and state transit funding has declined.
- Phelps County still has no Uber, Lyft, or Greyhound service, leaving residents without a car few options for longer trips.
- Seatbelt use in fatal crashes has worsened: in 2022, 40% of people killed were unbelted; by 2024, that number had risen to 75-100%.
- Bridge conditions have slipped, with one more bridge now in poor condition than in 2023, for a total of four.





# LOOKING AHEAD

Phelps County's future depends on the choices we make today. Two priorities stand out in this report. First, help families find and afford child care. Second, keep the local economy strong as unemployment rises.

The Phelps County Community Foundation will keep bringing people together to look at this data. We invite every resident, business, and organization to join that work. Progress happens when the whole community pulls in the same direction.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

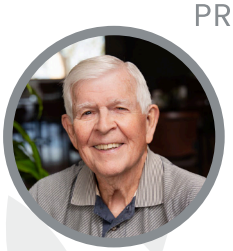
Thank you to the volunteer committee members, community partners, local governments, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, health care providers, business leaders, and residents who contributed to this report and to the ongoing success of Phelps County.



**BEN TIPTON**
PRESIDENT



**TRACY JENKINS**
CHAIR ELECT



**RICHARD CAVENDER**
SECRETARY



**BONNIE PRIGGE**
BOARD MEMBER



**CAROLYN BUSCHJOST**
BOARD MEMBER



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BOARD MEMBER



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BOARD MEMBER



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TREASURER



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